

PETER LEHMAN · WILLIAM LUHR

THINKING ABOUT MOVIES



WATCHING, QUESTIONING, ENJOYING

FOURTH **4** EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

THINKING ABOUT

MOVIES

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and **WILLIAM LUHR**

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Set in 10/12pt Galliard by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

For my son, David, with admiration and love

William Lubr

For my grandchildren, Lila and Jonah, with love

Peter Lehman

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Thinking about Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying, Fourth Edition is designed to introduce students to a variety of approaches for understanding movies. Our goal is to help students to always watch movies critically and analytically and to learn that doing this will increase their enjoyment rather than detract from it.

We have designed this book to be used in a variety of classroom settings. It provides an introduction to film study for students who have never previously taken a film course and may never take another one. It is comprehensive and includes the major fundamental areas of the field. At the same time, the book is sufficiently detailed and cutting-edge to take its place within a well-structured film curriculum that includes specialized courses in such areas as film theory and criticism, film history, the film industry, media and gender studies, and film and television as well as new media. We use a clear, jargon-free style that is readily accessible to students and the general reader.

The book introduces film studies in an ever-broadening pattern, which we describe in Chapter 1. It is roughly divided into two major parts: the first deals with those things that are specific to the dynamics of cinema and the second with the relationship of film to larger social, cultural, and industrial issues. We start with showing methods by which students can understand the workings of individual films. These methods are commonly called textual analysis and deal with things that are “in” any film, such as its narrative, visual and spatial patterns. We then expand the focus to include the insights that we can derive from contextual analysis. These methods group films together to discover significant relationships among them such as authorship, genre, performance, or their place among series, sequels, and remakes.

Chapter 8 on “Audiences and Reception” occurs mid-way through the book and supplies the transition to even broader kinds of approaches: one of these confines itself to the world of the arts and media; the other moves beyond that world and engages issues concerning culture and society. The first approach requires understanding the relationship of film to the other arts, especially literature and the frequent practice of literary adaptation. We also have to understand the increasingly complex relationships among media, historically those of radio, television, and film. We devote chapters to both of those topics.

The second approach, dealing with social and cultural issues, is frequently termed ideological analysis because it engages such fundamental sociocultural

issues as race, class, and gender. Each of us defines ourselves in relationship to those categories and we devote a chapter to each one. To do so, however, we must introduce the fundamental issue of film theory since it teaches us that we cannot adequately question race, class, and gender if we naïvely believe that films depict unmediated “reality.” What is the relation between film and reality? What is “realism”?

We conclude the book with two dramatically different chapters: Chapter 15 uses a single film, *Citizen Kane*, undoubtedly the most highly praised American film of all time, to illustrate and summarize all the critical methods we have introduced. We do this not because we want to heap further praise upon the film but because we want to show that, no matter what a film’s reputation, we can and should always think critically about it. The final chapter gives a broad assessment of significant forces affecting the contemporary world of film, particularly the convergence of the technology and entertainment industries, the resultant trans-media environment, the new 3D technology, and globalization.

So, we return to the initial question, how should one use this book? The structure of the chapters enables students to read about every topic in general before reading about the specific film for that week or class and learning how that film illustrates important aspects of the general topic. We have found that, if an instructor tells students what to look for before screening a film, they will probably find it. However, students need not be tied to the interpretation that the chapter gives. Some students may learn more by watching the film with less guidance and then comparing their responses with what they hear in lecture or what they read and see illustrated in the later portion of the chapter. This may enable a more active learning experience. Are the authors convincing? Did they see something the authors didn’t see or mention? These questions not only make learning active but they also lead to lively discussions. Although this book has a logical structure, it is extremely flexible and instructors can change the order of the chapters and choose to skip various topics or extend others. We have successfully done so ourselves in various combinations.

The book is lavishly illustrated with over 500 film illustrations in both color and black and white, with illustrations from color films reproduced in color. We have highlighted key terms in bold and defined them in a glossary as well as supplied an index. We provide additional resources at the end of each chapter including “Annotated Readings” that acknowledge and briefly describe sources we have drawn upon for ideas, examples, and facts in the chapter. Occasionally, we have updated that bibliography with “Further Readings” to highlight significant new contributions. We also include a “Further Screenings” section with films available via streaming or on DVD, as well as relevant resources such as Web sites, blogs, social media, radio programs, and so on. Lastly, we provide “Topics for Discussion” for each chapter based upon our classroom experiences.

This new edition of the book also comes with a Companion Blog (<https://thinkingaboutmoviesblog.wordpress.com/>) that we will update regularly with attention to films and industry developments directly related to each chapter. We will also update readings and resources. As the world of film and media is changing rapidly, so is the world of film textbook publishing and the fourth edition of *Thinking about Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying* makes us all – as students, instructors, and authors – part of that.

Since we have both written, together and separately, on a variety of areas in film studies, we have, of course, drawn upon that research throughout this book. Although we feel an obligation as scholars to cite published sources upon which

we have drawn, we do not always consider it appropriate to do so in the chapter bibliographies, especially when the work is dated, out of print, or published in academic publications difficult for many undergraduates to access, or presented at professional conferences. Consequently, we have placed those citations here for the record (we try, however, to credit the key scholars in the field whose work we have drawn upon in the annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter):

Chapter 2 (Narrative Structure): William Luhr and Peter Lehman give a formal account of narrative, including a discussion of free and bound motifs and the distinction between story and plot, in *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema: Issues in Contemporary Aesthetics and Criticism* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1977).

Chapter 4 (Authorship): Peter Lehman also analyzes film authorship and *The Searchers* in Luhr and Lehman, *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema: Issues in Contemporary Aesthetics and Criticism* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1977) and in his Ph.D. dissertation, "John Ford and the Auteur Theory" (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1978).

Chapter 6 (Series, Sequels, and Remakes): William Luhr analyzes the 1933 and 2005 *King Kong*, as well as other films related to them, with reference to reception and censorship issues in "Reprocessing Kong: Censorship, Repression, and Compensatory Strategies," a paper delivered at the 2007 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference.

Chapter 9 (Film and the Other Arts): William Luhr and Peter Lehman discuss the distinctions between literature and film and Luhr analyzes *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as an example, in *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1977). William Luhr also analyzes the relationship of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel to both stage and film versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as narrative structure, visual motifs, and issues of sexuality in *Dracula and Nosferatu, in Victorian Novels on Film* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1979).

Chapter 12 (Gender and Sexuality): Peter Lehman discusses female vision and power in *Silence of the Lambs* in "In the Dark Basement: Silence of the Lambs and Female Vision in the Hollywood Cinema," lecture delivered at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, 1992.

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ABOUT THE COMPANION BLOG

The fourth edition of *Thinking about Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying* is accompanied by a Companion Blog designed and maintained by Peter Lehman and William Luhr:

<https://thinkingaboutmoviesblog.wordpress.com>

The Companion Blog will be regularly updated by the authors and includes:

- News and information on films and developments in the industry directly related to each chapter.
- Updates posted by the authors on further readings and useful resources for instructors and students.

1

INTRODUCTION

Fatal Attraction and Scarface



Fig. 1.1

People Have Many Different Responses to Movies

When *Zero Dark Thirty* opened in theaters in the United States in January 2013, it ignited a storm of controversy culminating with a serious threat of a congressional investigation empowered to summon the filmmakers to Capitol Hill to testify about the film! How could a fictional Hollywood film be of such interest or importance that members of Congress would launch an investigation? What was at stake? On the surface, the answer was easy. The film, which claimed to be based on a true story, is about the hunt for and eventual killing of Osama bin Laden following the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The film included scenes of the CIA graphically torturing prisoners of war to gather information about bin Laden's whereabouts (Figure 1.1). The controversy was multi-faceted. Several members of congress went so far as to demand to know the sources for the film's claims about the alleged torturing and even demanded that the film be re-edited prior to video release, removing the scenes suggesting that torture yielded vital information. Others, including its Academy Award winning director, Kathryn Bigelow, defended the film, pointing to complex narrative ambiguity that in fact could just as easily be read the exact opposite way: after torture fails and the prisoners are treated humanely, they give accurate information. She and the studio refused any re-editing and resisted all censorship attempts.

A similar controversy erupted in 2014 when Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* opened (Figure 1.2). Some



Fig. 1.2



Fig. 1.3



Fig. 1.4

critics hailed it as a pro-Iraq war film about a genuine American war hero. Quickly, others denounced it for just those reasons, seeing the film as a predictable conservative film uniting war and American patriotism. But a third position rejected the previous two and hailed the film as a complex anti-war examination of its subject. Reportedly, one of the major pro-war commentators who hailed the film later even acknowledged that he had not seen the film when making his comments and one of the major anti-war commentators who denounced the film also acknowledged he had not seen it! They just simply presumed they knew what they had to know based upon their preconceptions of Clint Eastwood as a movie star-director-politician and Chris Kyle as a celebrated war hero who had written his account of the war in his book upon which the film was based. Clint Eastwood responded to the critical controversy by repeatedly saying he saw the film as strongly anti-war, aligning himself with the third position described above.

When *Spotlight* (2015), a much different kind of film about *The Boston Globe* 2001 investigation of alleged priest child abuse within the Catholic Church, opened it was generally hailed and critically acclaimed (Figure 1.3). The subject matter, however, was disturbing and potentially controversial with its focus on abuse and cover-up in the Catholic Church, a subject the media seized upon. But the treatment and the fact that it was based both upon actual events that had taken place in Boston and also within *The Boston Globe* journalistic investigation led to the film winning the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of 2015.

Ironically, controversy can help box-office and bring critical acclaim to films. All three of the above films were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. Regardless of their opinions about them, most people considered them “serious” films within “real” historical contexts. When *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2015, Figure 1.4) came out, however, most people simply responded to it as an action-adventure thriller, one that related not to their own social reality or to history but rather to other films in the series and in its genre, such as the James Bond, Jason Bourne, or Mission Impossible films. People either liked or did not like it but few debated its agenda with the intensity with which many responded to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper*, or *Spotlight*. Yet, we will see in the coming chapters that seemingly innocent genre entertainment films may address or mask important social and cultural issues and contain potentially challenging ideas and characters or damaging racial, class, and gender stereotypes. Regardless of whether people see movies as relating to the world in which they live or the world of other movies, any movie can evoke a diversity of responses; some are predictable; others can be unexpected. We can learn a great deal from exploring this diversity.

There are many reasons why people respond to movies in such different ways; all are important.

We have all stood in the lobby of a theater and heard conflicting opinions from people who have just seen the same film. Some loved it, some were annoyed by it, some found it just OK. Perhaps we’ve thought, “Well, what do they know? Maybe they just didn’t get it.” So we go to the reviewers whose business it is to “get it.” But often they do not agree. One reviewer will love a film, the next will tell us to save our money. What thrills one person may bore or even offend another. Disagreements and controversies reveal a great deal about the assumptions underlying these varying responses. If we explore these assumptions, we can ask

questions about what provoked them and about how sound they are. Questioning our assumptions and those of others is a good way to start thinking about movies. We will soon see that there are many productive ways of thinking about movies and many approaches that we can use to analyze them.

In *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1992), Bruce Lee (Jason Scott Lee) sits in an American movie theater (Figure 1.5) and watches a scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) in which Audrey Hepburn's glamorous character awakens her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Yunioshi. Half awake, he jumps up, bangs his head on a low-hanging, "Oriental"-style lamp, and stumbles around his apartment crashing into things. The audience in the theater laughs uproariously at this scene of slapstick comedy but Lee does not. To the contrary, he becomes more and more enraged until finally he and his girlfriend leave the theater.

Lee is Chinese, his girlfriend is white, and *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* has shown him to be the victim of anti-Asian prejudice in the United States. In this scene, Mickey Rooney, a white man, plays Mr. Yunioshi, an Asian man, who is the butt of the humor; the character's appearance (exaggerated make-up that makes him appear to be bug-eyed with "buck teeth"), dialect (he speaks with an exaggerated accent), and actions (comic ineptness), all reinforce stereotypical and degrading views of Asian behavior (Figure 1.6). Lee feels that this characterization, combined with the audience's laughter, reflects and contributes to his own assimilation problems. Others in the audience, however, do not see the movie in this way at all. They respond, or think they respond, only to the slapstick: the same scene, but very different responses. Furthermore, Lee's girlfriend initially joins in the laughter but becomes uncomfortable when she senses his pain.

Movies and Entertainment

Why do we go to the movies? Most of us go for entertainment. Indeed, Bruce Lee and his girlfriend are on a date when they see *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a common context in which young people see movies. Going out on a date, having fun, and eating popcorn may all make it seem as if movies are fairly simple things that do not require much thought. Just sit back and enjoy them. But, as *Dragon* illustrates, having fun is not isolated from serious issues. Lee does not go to the movies in order to contemplate his social oppression but, in the midst of a light-romantic comedy, that is precisely what happens. He comes to an awareness that motivates his entire career: he will soon dedicate his life to offering alternative images of Asian men in the cinema. However worthy, we should note that this scene constructs a motivation for Lee that shapes the film's thematic development in a manner that highly simplifies biographical reality, the consequences of which we will discuss below.

Far from being frivolous, entertainment may actually provide a pleasurable smokescreen beneath which disturbing issues can be either reinforced or, more helpfully, contemplated. Different genres lend themselves to the examination of particular social and cultural issues. The modern horror film, beginning with *Psycho* (1960, Figure 1.7) and including



Fig. 1.5



Fig. 1.6

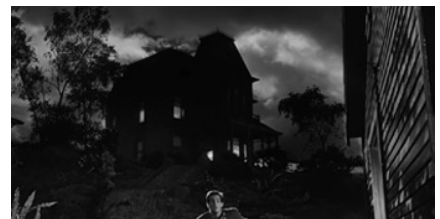


Fig. 1.7



Fig. 1.8



Fig. 1.9

such films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), locates the most hideous horror at the center of the home and family. People go to those films, of course, to get scared to death, shriek, and jump out of their seats, not to contemplate whether the once joyous nuclear family with a working father and housewife mother is an outmoded institution that has become the breeding ground for psychotic murderers. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 5, it may be precisely because we enjoy being scared to death that these films can take such an unflinching look at the family. All of those films have also recently been remade: *Psycho* in 1998, *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006 (Figure 1.8) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2003 (Figure 1.9) and in Chapter 6 we will discuss the significance of such remakes. Similarly, most people go to action/adventure spy films because they enjoy the excitement of the chases and fights, the exotic locales, the dazzling espionage gadgets, and the last minute escapes, not because they want to contemplate changing gender roles within American society, ongoing Cold War dangers, and corruption within the US govern-

ment. Yet, a film like *Salt* makes very clear that that, in part, is what the genre is about.

At times, different films or genres reflect virtually opposed responses to common cultural concerns. As the modern horror film has focused upon the collapse of traditional images of the supportive nuclear family, a number of recent historical epics have championed a return to conservative family values and linked the maintenance of those values with grand issues of national identity and continuity. Films like *War Horse* (2011), *Braveheart* (1995), *Saving Private Ryan* (1997), *Gladiator* (2000), *The Patriot* (2000), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) begin with devastations to or dysfunctions within traditional families and show their damaged heroes going on to help save their nation during a time of crisis; these films conclude with a sense of a triumphant society realigned to “proper” values. *War Horse*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Patriot*, and *Pearl Harbor* all close with images of strong nuclear families that signify national continuity. *Gladiator* closes with the dying hero envisioning an Elysian reunion with his lost family, and the implication that his sacrifice has made the Roman Empire safe for similar families. Such endings could hardly be more different from the endings of recent horror films, but modern horror films and historical epics both respond to a common cultural impulse – anxiety about the decline of the traditional family at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Part of understanding movies is understanding the complex ways in which they relate to the society that produced them. People frequently assume this with movies like the Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but we will see that it is just as useful in exploring issues of race, class, and gender in a wide variety of genres including horror films, historical epics, action/adventure spy films, comedies, and Westerns. A Western like *Posse* (1993), for example, with its large cast of central black characters, seems odd when compared with classic Westerns, such as *Red River* (1948), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953), which have no central black characters and frequently do not even contain marginalized images of blacks. The “civilized” West, these films assume, was a West peopled with whites. *Posse*, however, explicitly refers to the fact that the historical “West”

contained many blacks; this implicitly leads the viewer to question their absence in traditional Westerns. When we look at the vast majority of Westerns from 1900 to 1970 and see virtually no blacks anywhere, we begin to learn about the racial priorities of American society and of the film industry during that period. The same is true with, for example, the near absence of Jews in the genre. *Deadwood* (2004–2006), a revisionist Western television series, foregrounds this with a central Jewish character who is a salesman nicknamed “the hardware Jew.”

We can often learn a great deal not only from what we see in a film but also from what we do not see, from what the film ignores. Films about national US law enforcement agencies such as the FBI or the Treasury Department seldom explored the sexuality of major historical figures involved in them but *J. Edgar* (2011) presents the powerful FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, as a repressed homosexual who barely understood his sexuality and whose confusion led to destructive professional behavior. Such a sexual/historical interpretation would have been inconceivable until recently and is simply invisible in most movies dealing with the FBI from the 1930s through at least the 1970s.

Certain films “push all the buttons” and stimulate widespread enthusiasm or anger at the time of their release. Such reactions can reveal a great deal about the ways in which we look at films and think about them. In 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* became a lightning rod for both adoration and fury for its representation of blacks and the Ku Klux Klan. In 1993, both *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler’s List* pushed all the buttons, but they were different buttons.

Jurassic Park is, worldwide, one of the largest grossing box-office movies ever made. Half a year after *Jurassic Park* appeared, its director, Steven Spielberg, released *Schindler’s List*, one of the most critically acclaimed films of that year. They are very different kinds of film. *Schindler’s List* received twelve Academy Award nominations, whereas *Jurassic Park* received only three, but earned much more money. *Jurassic Park* was, in many ways, exactly what Spielberg’s fans expected – a fantasy filled with childlike wonder and moments of great terror, like Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975). *Jurassic Park* also spawned two sequels and a number of video games and amusement park rides, comparable to *Jaws*, which inspired three sequels as well as video games. *Schindler’s List* seemed to come from a “different” Spielberg, since it is a three-and-a-half-hour, intensely serious, black-and-white film about the Holocaust. It has inspired neither sequels, nor video games, nor amusement park rides. Most of the critical respect went to *Schindler’s List*, most of the money went to *Jurassic Park*.

Yet we must question rather than simply accept the seeming dichotomy between these two films. The Academy Awards typically honor serious films that represent Hollywood in a respectable light. That may help explain why many of the most successful genre directors such as Charles Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Blake Edwards never won best director awards during the years in which their best comedies, mysteries, and Westerns were made and why directors like John Ford who won such awards only did so for his non-Westerns. Perhaps to acknowledge the oversight, the Academy honored all of these directors late in their careers, or in Ford’s case for other films. Blake Edwards, for example, received an Oscar for lifetime achievement in 2003, a decade after making his last film, *Son of the Pink Panther* (1993, Figure 1.10), one of his typical physical comedies. This neglect of genre directors may also help explain why comedies seldom win best picture



Fig. 1.10

of the year and why, when they do, they are likely to be comedies with overtly serious subject matter rather than slapstick. From this perspective, *Jurassic Park* is too much of an action-adventure, science-fiction film to be taken seriously. But this may tell us more about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences than it tells us about anything intrinsic to *Jurassic Park*.

If we switch perspectives to that of authorship, as we will expand upon in Chapter 4, we may begin to notice unexpected similarities between Spielberg's genre entertainments and *Schindler's List*. Although the latter film is about the Jews during the Holocaust, its central character is an Aryan played by Liam Neeson, a handsome young actor. He thus parallels the character of Indiana Jones played by Harrison Ford in the series of popular films featuring that character. Furthermore, the victimized Jews are reduced to an historical backdrop of undifferentiated people who show no active agency in their salvation; they must be saved by Schindler, who thus becomes a hero figure like Indiana Jones. Is this a whole new Steven Spielberg?

A different perspective entirely involves formal issues. In 2009, James Cameron's *Avatar* pushed all the buttons primarily because of its innovative use of 3D, a mode of cinematography and exhibition that had seemed marginal to the film industry since a short burst of popularity in the early 1950s. Its runaway success (it has, to date, earned an astonishing near-\$3 billion worldwide) led to dozens of new 3D films being made and many older films, like Cameron's 1997 *Titanic*, being converted for 3D release. *Avatar* can be discussed productively in many ways, but, for the general public in 2009, a major part of the film's appeal was its new digital 3D process, which marked a big technological advance upon the older process. Soon after its release, many people would go to see other films in this new 3D format film just as many people would see new sound films at the beginning of the sound era. It now appears unlikely that 3D will become a new norm for filmmaking, as sound and color did in their eras but, whatever its fate, a decade from now, its novelty will have faded and people will view these films in different ways than they do now. There will be different buttons to push.

Critical Approaches to Understanding Movies

Throughout this book, we will be encouraging a critical process that is, by definition, never finished. As soon as we stop questioning, we are in danger of accepting easy and obvious "truths" that can blind us to important issues. Let us return for a moment to *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* to illustrate how this works. As we have suggested, the film provocatively dramatizes the evils of racial stereotyping in Hollywood films. As such, many might think that it should simply be embraced as a progressive step forward. Notice, however, that in the movie theater scene that we have discussed, Lee, the central character, is with his girlfriend. He is the one who has insight and, when she sees his rage, she adopts his position. If we just look at this scene, there is no problem. He, after all, is Asian and she is white, so it makes perfect sense that he would recognize the ugly racism of the film they are watching and she would adopt his insights. This, however, is not an isolated incident. *Dragon* constantly reinforces traditional gender roles by marginalizing her role and limiting her to comparatively brief scenes in which she is seen primarily as a girlfriend or wife-mother. She is narratively subordinate to the central male character in a manner that, as in most Hollywood films, *Dragon* never questions or challenges. At every level, *Dragon* asks us to unquestioningly accept current stereotypes of women in film that are equivalent to the racial stereotypes in *Breakfast*