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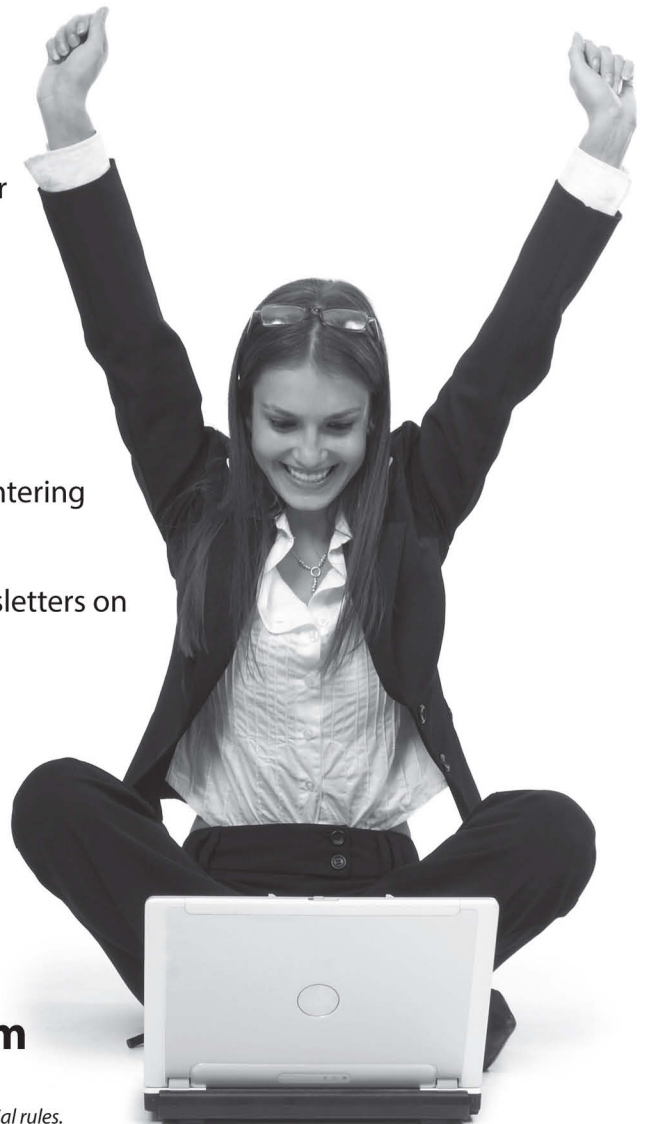
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by James Cateridge



Film Studies For Dummies®

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Introduction

You may already consider yourself a film buff – or get called a film geek behind your back (absolutely nothing wrong with that, all the best film students and film scholars start out that way). If you have a passion for film of any kind, hold on to it. Wear your film-geek label with pride.

But if you want to become a successful film student, you need to add a few tools to your toolbox, which is where this book comes in. A good film student doesn't simply memorise film facts – who played who in what and whether they received Oscars that year. After all, the Internet now remembers all these details. Instead, a film student can take a movie to bits to see how it works, place it into its historical or social context, or use it to help explain and understand aspects such as politics and national identity. Film studies isn't about *what* and *who*, it's about *how* and most importantly *why*.

If you take a class in film studies – or choose to pursue a degree in it – I'm afraid that you're going to have to put up with lots of sniggering about 'Mickey Mouse studies'. Everybody watches films, don't they? Does that mean universities should hand out degrees with subscriptions to Netflix? Ignore these people. They're just jealous.

Unlike many other forms of art, films were and continue to be genuinely, staggeringly popular – and some people confuse popularity with stupidity. But that's the stupidest mistake of all. To be popular, films need to resonate deeply with great swathes of the world's population while also providing a direct emotional connection with every single ticket-buying audience member. And that, in my humble opinion, is rather clever.

To those who question the value of your chosen subject, remind them that studying novels or plays was considered frivolous and ridiculous as recently as 100 years ago. The world has changed, and cinema has reflected and sometimes contributed to these changes.

For those lucky enough to study or teach it, film studies isn't just a hobby – it's an academic discipline that stretches and tests your skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, when film became a discipline, it also acquired bucket loads of jargon. And nothing is more likely to make you feel like a dummy than a dense, unreadable book that presumes you already know a lot more than you do.

So this book is *Film Studies For Dummies* not because I think you're an idiot (on the contrary, you've already shown wise judgement in reading this far!)

but because I'm aware of the barriers that some (but not all) film studies books put up to readers. Don't worry, this book doesn't do barriers.

About This Book

Scholars have a few conventional ways of writing about films, which generally involve keeping things as clear and uncluttered as possible. So I use such conventions in this book to help you get accustomed to them.

I put film titles into *italics* to help separate them visually from the rest of the text. The first time I mention a film in a section, I include a year after it in brackets. This year is when the film was first released in cinemas, not when it was produced (which often takes several years anyway). The release date gives you an instant idea of historical context and avoids confusion between films with similar or identical titles.

When talking about film characters, knowing who plays them is important. So the first time I mention a character, the actor's name appear in brackets afterwards. Some film studies books also give the director's name in brackets after the film's first mention, but I don't follow that convention. Doing so tends to signal a reverence for directors over and above the other people who collaborate on a film, which is a matter of some debate in film studies (as you find out as you read on).

Films made in other countries around the world usually have two titles, one in the original language and an English translation. The one that I place first and use for subsequent mentions often comes down to familiarity. Some foreign films are very well known by their English titles and so I place that first, for example *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*) (1957). Whereas others tend to keep their original title and sometimes require no English translation, such as *La Dolce Vita* (1960).

When analysing and describing films, I introduce certain technical terms to you. Most are clear and easy enough to understand and use. However the terms used to describe *shots* (short sections of continuous action which are edited together into longer *sequences*) can cause confusion. To be clear from the word go, I have stuck to the following conventions when describing the amount of *time* that a shot takes or the *distance* of the camera from the shot:

- ✓ **Close-up:** The camera is close to the subject (such as an actor) and it therefore fills the frame.
- ✓ **Wide shot:** The camera is far away from the subject and it appears small in the frame, surrounded by its environment.

- ✔ **Short take:** The shot is over in a few seconds before it is replaced by another image through editing.
- ✔ **Long take:** The shot lasts for a long time, such as minutes or even (very occasionally) hours.

Finally, notice that I coop up some sections of text in grey boxes. Poor side-bars. They contain detailed information or specific examples that you don't strictly need to remember. You can ignore them if you want. But doing so makes make them sad.

Foolish Assumptions

You may have some assumptions about me as a film scholar. You probably think that I spend too much time watching films and need to get out more. You aren't far wrong. But enough about me, here's what I think about you:

- ✔ You already love films, have seen plenty of them and want to see more.
- ✔ You may well be coming to the end of your formal education and considering your options for further study. May I suggest doing film studies? This book can help you decide whether it's right for you and get you going in the correct direction.
- ✔ If you're already doing film studies, well done. Good decision. This book can serve as your handy reference guide to important topics – or as a way of finding new methods or theories to use.
- ✔ If you have no interest in doing film studies at university, but simply want to deepen your knowledge of one of life's great pleasures – watching movies – great. You're also in the right place.

If any or several of the preceding sound like you, read on.

Icons Used in This Book

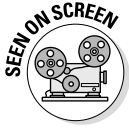
If you like films, you're probably a visual person. So this book uses the zippy visual convention of icons to draw your eyes to important sections or help you scan through for the bits you want.



This icon indicates handy hints and small activities that you can do to help practise the big ideas.



Some bits of this book are more important than others. They may be key concepts or facts that you need to grasp in order to move forward. This icon highlights them so that you don't have to use a highlighter pen.



Examples make all ideas easier to get your head around, and so this book features plenty of mini case studies of films. To pick them out, follow the icon.



If you're scared of theory, this icon may not have the desired effect. But I hope that this book shows that you can understand the difficult concepts and cure your theory-phobia.



Film scholars love a good argument. This icon signals when two different ways of understanding a particular topic exist.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the amazing content that you hold in your hands, this book also includes companion digital content. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/filmstudies for definitions of essential film studies terms, quick bite-sized chunks of meaty film theory and a handy overview of film history broken down into well-known movements.

Each part of this book features a link to an online article by yours truly. Check out each part page or go to www.dummies.com/extras/filmstudies to find articles that extend the content covered in the book.

Where to Go from Here

Film studies is big, and so is this book. If you have no idea where to begin, I recommend reading Chapter 1 first, because it serves as a kind of overview of the whole field. I hope that it starts those little light bulbs going off above your head. If this happens, look for more on that topic in the contents page and off you go.

Each part brings together chapters that look at films in similar ways. To explore different types of films, Part II is your place to start. Or if you want to get theoretical, head straight to Part IV. You can choose to read the book from beginning to end if you like, or you can jump around from section to section. The choice is yours. Enjoy the ride.

Part I

Getting Started with Film Studies



For Dummies can help get you started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to discover more and do more with *For Dummies* books.

In this part . . .

- ✓ Appreciate the art of storytelling on film.
- ✓ Differentiate the contributions of film professionals, including screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, editors and many others.
- ✓ Gaze at film stars and go behind their glamorous images.
- ✓ Analyse film narratives, dissect shots and sequences, and understand the editing process.

Chapter 1

Becoming a Fantastic Film Student

In This Chapter

- ▶ Starting your film studies journey
 - ▶ Analysing the building blocks of film
 - ▶ Appreciating the importance of films to the world
-

Film studies is about appreciating, understanding and explaining the greatest art form of the 20th century, which despite repeated predictions to the contrary is still going strong. The discipline involves research into and analysis of films, first and foremost, but also film-makers, film cultures, the film industry and film audiences.

To fulfil its aims, film studies borrows the best methods and theories from other academic areas, notably literary (or other cultural) studies and philosophy, as well as political science, sociology and psychology. In addition, analysing films uses similar tools to analysing paintings and photographs, but with the essential addition of movement.

If you already love film and want to become a film student, you've come to the right place. In this chapter, I take you through the basics of studying film: from learning how to watch films critically, to understanding the different types of film writing that you can use for research, to justifying the meaning and importance of cinema for the wider world. Everyone knows that film is important, but as a film student you need to develop ways to say *why* and *how* it matters.

Upping Your Cinematic Game

To study films, you have to do more than simply watch them; you have to try to *understand* them, which doesn't just happen – studying films requires time and effort. And put on your leggings, like the kids from *Fame* (1980), cos right here's where you start paying. In sweat.

Going beyond merely watching films

Luckily, many (if not most) people love watching films. But many people decide that simply enjoying movies is enough for them, or even worry that studying films may destroy the pleasure they take from them.



You needn't worry about ruining the fun of watching films as you step into the world of film studies. Studying films not only helps you to understand why everyone needs a bit of escapism, but also offers entirely new ways to enjoy cinema:

- ✓ Understanding cinematic narrative structures can make even the dumbest action movie seem quite profound (check out Chapters 4 and 5).
- ✓ Knowing about film history can make a 100-year-old silent film as fresh and exciting as the day it was first screened (see Chapter 2 to read about early cinema).
- ✓ Appreciating the many techniques, skills and creative decisions that go into creating a successful picture can keep you interested even when the story sags.
- ✓ Viewing a wider range of films builds up your reference points and helps you understand how the classics influence contemporary cinema.
- ✓ Reading and appreciating film criticism means that you always have an opinion about what you just saw. Prepare yourself to start winning pub debates with ease.

Film studies is fun, yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's easy. You've been watching films in your own particular way for most of your life, and making the effort to step back and analyse something so instinctive and pleasurable can be quite difficult. Like trying to explain why you love ice cream – or sausages!



To start doing this kind of analysis, I recommend starting with your favourite film of all time. I don't mean the film you use as your favourite to impress people (step forward, *Citizen Kane*). I mean your genuine favourite, the one you watch while you're ill in bed or after getting back from a late night out.

Ask yourself what you enjoy about this film: the familiar storyline or the rewarding pay-off when the protagonists complete their journeys? Do you relate to one particular character or does the film showcase your favourite star (the person you want to be like or be with)? Or does the music – or the gorgeous images – keep you coming back?

Whatever your main reason (and be honest), focus on that and watch your film again, by yourself with no interruptions. This time, take notes. Doing so is really important. Write down every thought that occurs to you about how

the film works and why you find it enjoyable. Even draw pictures if you want to. Stick men shooting each other can be a surprisingly effective way to capture and recall what is happening on screen.

If you can manage to view and take notes successfully with your favourite film, congratulations, you've broken free from the chains of habitual watching and are now analysing, assessing and being critical. That's where you need to start.

Connecting film studies to other stuff you can study

Film studies is inherently *interdisciplinary*, which means that it steals the best theories and research methods from other fields of study and applies them to films. This aspect of film studies is useful, because even if you've never studied films before you may well have encountered a few film studies methods already.

I hope that the following experiences and related methods come flooding back to you as you read this book.

Studying stories

Analysing storytelling is a process that's very similar regardless of whether you find the story in a book, on the stage or on the silver screen. So if you spent any time grappling with literary classics at school, you have a basic understanding of concepts such as characterisation and narrative point of view, which you can apply to films.

Look a little deeper and you soon realise that some of the theories you use to understand books and those you use in film studies are strikingly similar. For example, you may be familiar with the notion that you can boil down all stories to seven (or even just three) basic universal plots, which have entertained humans throughout history.

This notion of *universal stories* or *myths* comes from a branch of literary theory called *structuralism*, which also happens to be useful when studying films. Even Hollywood producers use a type of shorthand all the time when describing movies:



- ✔ Boy meets girl. Boy hates girl. Boy falls for girl. Boy loses girl. Boy fights to get girl back. Girl gives in.
- ✔ Girl versus shark. Shark wins. Boy versus shark. Boy loses first round due to personality flaw. Boy tackles personality flaw. Boy beats shark.
- ✔ Cowboy rides into border town. Cowboy shoots bad people. Cowboy rides off into the sunset.

Breaking films down into basic plot elements – and implying that the same stories are repeated over and over with only minor changes – is pure structuralism. So you see, Hollywood isn't as stupid as it often seems. (For much more on structuralism, flip to Chapter 13.)

Studying people and places

Watching films is an enormously popular activity across the world, and like any large-scale human activity, you can use methods from the social sciences to analyse and explain the phenomenon. When you take a sociological approach to studying film, you're less interested in the films themselves and more interested in the people who consume or produce them.

Audience research is an important branch of film studies, which gathers data from its human subjects in many different ways. You can achieve broad surveys by using simple questionnaires, or gain more detailed and nuanced analysis through individual interviews or focus groups. The data provided can be *quantitative*, such as percentages or charts, or *qualitative*, like explanations of behaviour or emotional responses.



Cinema is a global phenomenon, and so analysing films in relation to places can be helpful. The long-standing and continued interest in studies of national cinemas is the most obvious spatial concern of film studies, as Part III of this book attests. But the national character of film has also been tested by film scholars driven by the concept of *transnationalism*. For example, studying the films of a population who are displaced or dispersed across many countries or even continents provides a transnational perspective on so-called migrant or *diasporic* cinema.

Studying the past

To understand how cinema works in a particular place, you also need to think about how it developed over time. Therefore another important area of film studies draws from historical theories and methods. Historical research relies on traces of evidence to help illuminate the past, and so archives of material (including film archives) are vital.



Of course films themselves are a kind of historical evidence, particularly the *actuality films* (short scenes taken from real life) that were popular in the early days of cinema (see Chapter 2). Just take a look at a few of the Lumière brothers' films or those of Mitchell and Kenyon in Britain (I delve into British cinema of all sorts in Chapter 10). You soon realise just how much you can discover from looking into the eyes of factory workers as they left to go home at the end of a regular working day, over a century ago.

Focusing on creativity, industry and technology

Film is such a rich, varied and important object of study because it exists at the intersection of three major forces of the modern era: creativity, industry and technology – each of which I explore in the following sections.

Considering creativity

Of course film is an art form, but stop for a moment to think about what that really means. What exactly are the creative decisions that make one film different from another? What makes films ‘art’?

During the first few decades of film as it found its feet as a mass medium of entertainment, only crazy radicals thought of films as art. Back then everyone knew that art hung on gallery walls and had absolutely nothing to do with what entertained people on their evenings off.



But in the years following World War II, when popular cinema was at its zenith, a few French radicals came up with an argument that changed the way people think about film: *the auteur theory*. Borrowing from the literary Romantics, the auteur critics argued that films were the expression of a single creative force: the director.



According to auteur theorists, directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks and John Ford weren't simply hacks for hire; they were *artists*. Their personal visions and imaginations were powerful enough to overcome any institutional barriers. The auteur theory is attractive but problematic, because unlike books and poems commercial Hollywood films are massive collaborative projects (I talk a lot more about Hollywood in Chapter 9).

Whether you agree with the auteur theory or not (and film studies encourages well-argued disagreements), at least it raises the possibility that films can be great works of art. (Dive into Chapter 14 and see how the auteur theory works – or doesn't work – for your film-viewing experience.)

Other theoretical frameworks that scholars later applied to film downplay the role of the artist/director and argue that film is an art form because it developed its own specific language and grammar (see Chapters 13 and 15).

Some film-makers like to think of themselves as more arty than others, such as radical types. *Avant-garde cinema* positions itself against the mainstream language of film, subverts its rules and conventions, and denies its audience easy explanations or simple pleasures. I know, that doesn't sound like much fun, but don't dismiss it. At its best, avant-garde film innovates and leads where mainstream film later follows. (I bravely attempt to decipher avant-garde cinema in Chapter 7.)

And, of course, some films are literally art in the sense of being made of paintings or drawings: animated ones. The craft and technique of the greatest animation is dazzling: from Walt Disney's ornate features to inventive Looney Tunes cartoons (see Chapter 6 for more on these), not to mention world-beating Japanese anime (see Chapter 12).



But the most important way in which films are art is that they mean something to their audiences. The greatest art is emotionally engaging and helps you to discover a little bit more about the world and your place in it. I'm sure that certain films have played that role in your life. If not, trust me, you're watching the wrong kind of films.

Investigating industrial perspectives

Films cost a lot of money to make and can generate a lot of money in return. This simple, obvious fact means that you can't ignore economic issues when studying the movies. Yes, cinema is an art form, but unlike starving poets or misunderstood painters, struggling directors have to make financial deals to get their visions onto the screen while still finding ways to pay the bills.



Hollywood invests a great deal of time and effort (and money) trying to convince audiences that 'there's no business like show business', but this mantra is basically baloney. The same basic economic principles guide the behaviour of individuals and companies in the film industry as in every other type of business:

- ✓ Movie producers invest in products, which compete in a marketplace to make back their costs and (investors hope) deliver a healthy profit.
- ✓ Entertainment companies have to pay a range of employees, from top star actors (who can be male or female – wander star-struck to Chapter 3 for more) to the people who clean out their trailers.
- ✓ Film companies can grow, be bought out by other bigger companies or go bust.

Making films is different, however, to producing other industrial products, such as cars or chocolate bars, in some key ways:

- ✓ Each individual product is unique, and therefore risky, because demand for it is uncertain – which is why summer blockbusters tend to be sequels or remakes to mitigate the risk.
- ✓ Successful films have a practically unlimited shelf life and can go on generating revenue for decades to come.
- ✓ Films are complex creative products that require a diverse range of skills from many different people all at the same time. Just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, one of its major players performing below par can ruin a film. And everyone knows how reliable and consistent movie stars are, right?

- ✓ Reputation is the most valuable commodity for any film executive, director or actor. If you're a studio boss deciding whether to invest in a big budget production and you hear that the writer-director has recently fallen off the wagon, why be a schmuck and invest?
- ✓ Bad behaviour, technological setbacks or simple weather issues can easily throw intricate shooting schedules into chaos, haemorrhaging cash all over the place like blood in a Tarantino movie.

Many people in Hollywood repeat that you're only as good as your last picture, and the industry certainly has a brutal turnover of stars, directors, producers and studio bosses. The stakes are high, but the potential rewards are great. If you want job security, go work in a bank. On second thoughts. . . .

Thinking through technology



Cinema is truly an art form of the Victorian age. At its birth, it required huge, heavy machinery to record, develop and project moving images. Take a look at the design and style of these early machines (preferably in a museum or at least online) and you may be reminded of other great technological legacies of the 19th century, such as telephones and steam trains.



The technology that delivers the moving-picture experience has changed almost beyond recognition over the decades. The simplest way to see these changes is as a series of inevitable developments driving towards some theoretically perfect future technology: early moving pictures were silent and black and white, and so naturally sound and colour were later added.

But this way of thinking about technological development (known as *determinism*) has drawbacks. It assumes that consumers of early versions of the technology were unsatisfied because of its primitive state. No evidence exists that this was the case, just as it isn't true today. Were you aware that you wanted a high-definition TV screen until you first saw one in action? No: much more sensible to see a combination of factors driving cinema's technological development, most obviously connected to economic issues.

What tends to happen in reality is that an egghead invents an amazing new bit of technology, which is too expensive or risky to take up straight away. Eventually, one industry crisis or another causes someone to take the plunge. If it works, everyone jumps on the bandwagon – as happened with sound, colour, widescreen and 3D in the film industry.



To understand technological change you need to think carefully about the reasons that a technology *becomes widespread* at a particular time, which is often many years after it's theoretically possible. Check out the nearby sidebar 'Why sound came along when it did' for a great example.

Why sound came along when it did

The arrival of synchronised sound to the film industry in 1927 is the perfect example that what's most important isn't only the technology but usually the money that goes with it. Adding sound to film was technologically possible much earlier than 1927, but when early cinemas were booming the demand for change simply didn't exist.

Only in the late 1920s, as audience numbers faltered due to a deteriorating economy, did Warner Bros. decide to risk the innovation with much-loved stage performer Al Jolson in *The*

Jazz Singer (1927). The film was such a smash hit that 'the movies' very quickly became 'the talkies'.

Interestingly, the expense of investment in new projectors and sound systems was offset by savings on labour costs. Who got fired? Well, nearly every cinema in the world had at least one musician on the payroll, and many had bands and even full orchestras. These folks simply weren't needed thanks to synchronised sound. Don't play it again, Sam.

Writing about films: Reviews, criticism and academic style

In today's digital age, film scholars and film lovers have more ways than ever to write about film and to get that writing published. Even if all you do is post a couple of reviews on Amazon, you're a kind of film critic.

But to be a successful film student, you need to be able to tell the difference between different levels of writing about film. And of course, you have to do a bit of writing yourself.

Reviewing film reviewers

I'd like you to look back, way back into the mists of time, to that unbearably primitive era before the Internet. Imagine that you have a hankering to go to the pictures, but IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes and Ain't It Cool News don't exist. How on earth do you find out what's playing at your local cinema? And what's more, how do you know whether the films are any good or not?

Whether you remember it or not, just a few years ago you had to stand up (like some sort of cave-dweller), go to the shops and buy a newspaper or a film magazine just to be able to make that decision. The basic purpose of film reviewing before the Internet was informative. Reviewers had to have opinions, and their reviews had to make judgements on various films' quality, but these reviewers were permitted to be as personal and subjective as they liked.

Movie fans were therefore expected to find a reviewer or magazine whose opinion most closely matched their own and to consult them regularly. Of course, entertaining, well-written and pithy reviews also helped. Entertaining

reviews can be worth reading even if you don't agree with the reviewers' verdicts. The best-known film journalists such as Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert or Mark Kermode develop their own distinctive style and stick to it.



As a film student, you probably end up using film reviews as part of your research at one point or another. If you're looking into a very old film, reviews may be the only source of printed information available. Even for more recent movies, reviews can be useful as barometers of how the film was received on its original release.



You can make the case that film reviews are representative of audience taste during a particular period, because if the readers never agreed with the reviewers' opinions, those writers wouldn't last long in the job.

But you also have to use reviews with caution, because you can't assume that audiences always agreed with reviewers, or that films considered classics today were recognised as such on first release. (Read 'Some like it *not*' for particularly surprising initial reactions to a few beloved movies.) If possible, you need to be aware of the editorial or political bias of the sources you use. In the UK, for example, don't be surprised to find broadsheets such as *The Guardian* acclaiming art-house releases that tabloids simultaneously slate.

Being critical about film criticism

The differences between film journalism and film criticism are subtle but important. Whereas film journalism aims primarily to inform, film criticism attempts to discuss, argue and educate. Film criticism tends to be research-driven and present a case that the writer deems original and important. Criticism is also historical, whereas journalism tends to require a topical hook. Instead of the newspaper or popular magazine, film criticism's natural home is the film journal, a publication that may support a film club or society or have loftier intellectual ambitions.

Some like it *not*

Film history is littered with examples of films that reviewers mauled on original release but are now considered classics:

- ✓ ***The Wizard of Oz* (1939)**: 'Displays no trace of imagination, good taste or ingenuity . . . I say it's a stinkeroo.' *The New Yorker*, 1939.
- ✓ ***Sunset Boulevard* (1950)**: 'A pretentious slice of Roquefort.' *The New Yorker*, 1950.
- ✓ ***Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)**: 'Like Bonnie and Clyde themselves, the film rides off in all directions and ends up full of holes.' *Time*, 1967.
- ✓ ***Star Wars* (1977)**: 'The only way that *Star Wars* could have been exciting was through its visual imagination and special effects. Both are unexceptional.' *The New Republic*, 1977.

Key examples of film journals in Europe and the US include:

- ✓ ***Close Up (1927–33)***: Claimed on its launch to be ‘the first to approach films from the angles of art, experiment and possibility’. It was vital in establishing an intellectual film culture in Europe and is associated with the London Film Society, which was the first to screen radical films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in the UK.
- ✓ ***Cahiers du Cinéma (1951–today)***: Founded by André Bazin, whose writing on realism made him an influential early film theorist. *Cahiers . . .* is a great example of how film culture (such as a journal stuffed with new ideas) can go on to influence cinema itself, because many of its writers became the film-makers of the French New Wave in the late 1950s (see Chapters 11 and 14).
- ✓ ***Film Culture (1954–99)***: Run by Adolfo and Jonas Mekas. This journal provided a space to define and debate American Underground cinema (see Chapter 7). It also acted as a sort of mini award panel, giving prizes each year to independent film-makers.



Early film criticism, such as the writing found in these journals, was the direct forefather of film studies as an academic discipline. These critics were doing many of the things that film studies now does: theorising about how films work, researching films and directors, and writing a history of film-making and film language. Except that they were doing this work without the support of the university system, which wasn’t ready to accept film as an art form worthy of study until the 1970s.



Partly for this reason, film journals are an essential source for film studies research. For film history, they provide vital information and colour, and many of the founding texts of film theory originated on their pages. Since film studies was allowed into the hallowed halls of academia, other important journals have come along, and these publications feature much of the best and most cutting-edge research in the field. They’re now usually available online through membership of university libraries, and so you have no excuse not to use them in your own research projects.

Writing like a film student

One of the most difficult skills for new students of film to develop is achieving the right tone and style in written assignments: too conversational and you read like someone making stuff up as you go along; try to emulate the dense, complex style of much film theory and you’re likely to come across as pretentious, dry or confused. Film studies writing is a continual balancing act between readability and being authoritative, while ensuring that your own voice comes through loud and clear.