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- Explore the world through film

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by James Cateridge

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DUMMIES
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Film Studies For Dummies®

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.**, The Atrium,
Southern Gate, Chichester, www.wiley.com

This edition first published 2015

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Registered office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-118-88659-5 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-118-88653-3 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-88656-4 (ebk)

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Table of Contents

Introduction

[About This Book](#)

[Foolish Assumptions](#)

[Icons Used in This Book](#)

[Beyond the Book](#)

[Where to Go from Here](#)

Part I: Getting Started with Film Studies

Chapter 1: Becoming a Fantastic Film Student

[Upping Your Cinematic Game](#)

[Going beyond merely watching films](#)

[Connecting film studies to other stuff you can study](#)

[Focusing on creativity, industry and technology](#)

[Writing about films: Reviews, criticism and academic style](#)

[Studying Pictures, Moving and Otherwise](#)

[Reading a painting or drawing](#)

[Reading a photograph](#)

[Capturing movement in film](#)

[Expressing Why Film Matters to the World](#)

[Probing into politics](#)

[Reviewing race and nationality](#)

[Exploring gender](#)

Chapter 2: Putting Words and Pictures into Motion: The Film-Making Team

[Helming a Film: Directors and Their Collaborators](#)

[Thickening the Plot: Screenwriters](#)

[‘Authoring’ a film](#)

[Studying screenwriting](#)

[Writing action](#)

[Writing dialogue](#)

[Showing Them the Money: Film Producers](#)

[Giving producers their due](#)

[Producing the studio goods](#)

[Going it alone: Independent producers](#)

[Painting with Light: Cinematographers](#)

[Directing the photography](#)

[Achieving 'the look'](#)

[Harnessing technology](#)

[Getting the Film in the Can: Production](#)

[Setting the scene: Art directors](#)

[Turning the creative vision into a reality: Technical crew](#)

[Putting the Footage on the Screen: Post-Production](#)

[Cutting and constructing: Editors](#)

[Amplifying the images: Sound designers and composers](#)

[Visualising the impossible: Special-effects artists](#)

[Chapter 3: Watching the Stars Come Out: Film Stars, and Why We Love Them](#)

[Surveying Stars, in All Their Extraordinary Ordinarity](#)

[Distinguishing stars from actors](#)

[Analysing star image](#)

[Seeing stars as commodities](#)

[Identifying with stars](#)

[Sexing up the screen](#)

[Working like a star: Acting, performing, inhabiting](#)

[Exploring a World of Stars](#)

[Pondering European stardom](#)

[Seeing the new Hollywood in Bollywood](#)

[Separating Stardom and Celebrity](#)

[Living private lives in the public gaze](#)

[Star-making in the 21st century](#)

[Chapter 4: Building Movie Stories](#)

[Uncovering Mise-en-Scène](#)

[Analysing a scene](#)

[Looking deeply at all that stuff](#)

[Presenting the world as you know it \(sort of\)](#)

[Creating emotional pictures: Melodramatic mise-en-scène](#)

[Speaking the Language and Grammar of Film](#)

[Making a scene \(and a sequence\)](#)

[Selecting shots](#)

[Solving the Puzzle: Editing Film](#)

[Getting the story moving](#)

[Piecing together a film: Continuity editing](#)

[Considering alternatives to the classical model](#)

[Charting the Roles of Characters in Narrative](#)

[Causing an effect with an event](#)

[Characterising heroes and villains](#)

[Meeting sidekicks and helpers](#)

[Listening and Understanding Film Sound](#)

[Playing with emotions](#)

[Distinguishing between diegetic and non-diegetic sound](#)

[Listening to unheard melodies: Film music](#)

[Part II: Taking All Types: Genres, Modes and Style](#)

[Chapter 5: Distinguishing Films by Type: Genres and Style](#)

[Defining Genre](#)

[Banking on genre: The Hollywood Machine](#)

[Enjoying repetition - up to a point](#)

[Bending genres](#)

[Appreciating What a Man's Got to Do: Westerns](#)

[Linking westerns and the birth of Hollywood](#)

[Seeing why westerns are westerns](#)

[Pitting two sides against each other](#)

[Letting Yourself Go: Musicals](#)

[Showcasing fantastic performers](#)

[Integrating numbers with plot](#)

[Feeling better through musicals](#)

[Lurking in the Shadows: Horror](#)

[Drawing first blood](#)

[Facing your inner demons](#)

[Having nightmares on Elm Street and elsewhere](#)

[Voyaging Beyond: Sci-Fi](#)

[Rocketing to the moon](#)

[Exploring imaginary worlds](#)

[Dreaming of electric sheep and mechanical men](#)

[Peering Through the Darkness: Film Noir](#)

[Testing the limits of genre](#)

[Seeing noir as a style](#)

[Detecting spider women and their prey](#)

[Watching Boy Meet Girl, Time and Again: Romantic Comedy](#)

[Romancing the same old story](#)

[Digging deeper into chick flicks](#)

[Feeling bromantic](#)

[Chapter 6: Getting Animated about Animation](#)

[Considering Much More than Kids' Stuff](#)

[Bringing images to life](#)

[Making kids \(and grown-ups\) laugh](#)

[Animating counterculture](#)

[Going full circle: Cinema gets animated](#)

[Touring the Great Cartoon Factories](#)

[Disney: The mouse shall inherit the Earth](#)

[The Fleischer brothers: Betty pops out of the inkwell](#)

[Warner Bros.: Daffy Duck, Porky Pig and related anarchists](#)

[Pixar: Not just a Toy Story](#)

[Spanning the Globe: A World of Cartoons](#)

[Taking over, one toon at a time](#)

[Playing it straight? European animation](#)

[Drawing a history of violence: Animation from the Middle East](#)

[Chapter 7: Leading from the Front: Avant-Garde Film](#)

[Advance! Attempting to Pin Down the Avant-Garde](#)

[Standing against the mainstream](#)

[Sampling the many facets of the avant-garde](#)

[Determining when a cartoon isn't just a cartoon](#)

[Exploring Three Important Avant-Garde Ideas](#)

[Playing around with time](#)

[Not worrying about the story](#)

[Embracing abstract images](#)

[Drifting Off into a World of Dreams](#)

[Dissecting cows and priests in chains](#)

[Going into a cinematic trance](#)

[Mixing with the Mainstream: Avant-garde Everywhere](#)

[Chapter 8: Getting Real: The Truth about Documentary](#)

[Shaping Reality with Documentary Films](#)

[Comparing the documentary to fiction and to real life](#)

[Sorting documentaries: Six modes](#)

[Weighing documentary ethics](#)

[Capturing the 20th Century on Camera](#)

[Meeting plain-speaking Russians](#)

[Exploring the world and its people](#)

[Filming poetry or propaganda? World War II on film](#)

[Reclaiming objectivity: Direct cinema and cinéma vérité](#)

[Blending the Real and the Unreal: Documentary Today](#)

[Questioning America the beautiful](#)

[Marching with penguins and other creatures](#)

[Documenting digitally](#)

[Part III: Travelling a World of Wonders: Global Cinema](#)

[Chapter 9: Bringing Hollywood into Focus](#)

[Running the Dream Factory](#)

[Mass producing movies](#)

[Controlling the supply chain](#)

[Dominating international markets](#)

[Appealing to everyone, offending no one](#)

[Re-viewing Hollywood History](#)

[Laying foundations for the Golden Age](#)

[Breaking up the studio system: The United States versus Paramount Pictures](#)

[Rolling with the changes: New Hollywood](#)

[Heading Back to the Future: Blockbusters, Franchises and Indiewood](#)

[Eating Hollywood: Jaws](#)

[Deciphering agent-speak: Packaging, high concept and synergy](#)

[Acting like kids: Family franchise fun](#)

[Behaving like grown-ups: Indiewood](#)

[Chapter 10: Enjoying the British Invasion: From Brit-Grit to Frock Flicks](#)

[Getting Real: Brit-Grit](#)

[Paying for Free Cinema](#)

[Breaking the New \(British\) Wave](#)

[Finding poetry in common places](#)

[Meeting of the Screens: Big and Small](#)

[Assessing British television's influence on film](#)

[Coming to the British film industry's rescue: Channel 4](#)

[Leaping from TV to cinema screen](#)

[Adapting Great Works: 'Oh, Mr Darcy!'](#)

[Reviving the classics, over and over](#)

[The past today: Heritage films](#)

[Beating Hollywood at Its Own Game](#)

[Producing local films for local people](#)

[Bonding with Bond, James Bond](#)

[Casting a spell: Harry Potter and the magical franchise](#)

[Chapter 11: Admiring European Films: Culture and Commerce](#)

[Answering a Not-So-Simple Question: What Is European Cinema, Anyway?](#)

[Making a Rendezvous with French Cinema](#)

[Travelling from poetic realism to new extremism](#)

[Making an exception for French cinema](#)

[Appreciating a glamorous business: The Cannes Film Festival](#)

[Stepping Out of the Darkness: German Cinema](#)

[Lurking in the shadows: German Expressionism](#)

[Recreating \(New\) German Cinema](#)

[Melding Style and Substance: Italian Cinema](#)

[Finding heroes on the street: Neorealism](#)

[Featuring swords, sandals and naughty nuns: Italian genre and exploitation films](#)

[Meeting the prince of laughter: Totò](#)

[Watching Freedom Explode: Spanish Cinema](#)

[Considering Fascism and Catholicism](#)

[Returning of the repressed: Pedro Almodóvar](#)

[Chapter 12: Mixing Monsters, Musicals and Melodrama: World Cinema](#)

[Expanding Vision: World Cinema and Third Cinema](#)

[Journeying into Japanese Cinema: Godzilla, Anime and More](#)

[Reaching back to classical cinema, Japanese style](#)

[Facing an incredible, unstoppable titan of terror!](#)

[Agreeing that anime rules, okay](#)

[Investigating Indian Cinema: Bollywood and Beyond](#)

[Making a song and dance of Bollywood](#)

[Pondering Bengali film: World or parallel cinema?](#)

[Taking Bollywood global](#)

[Looking to Latin America Cinema](#)

[Brazil: Hollywood in the tropics?](#)

[Cuba: Small cinema, big ideas](#)

[Mexico's modern auteurs](#)

[Part IV: Bringing In the Big Ideas: Theories and Beyond](#)

[Chapter 13: Theorising about Film: How Movies Work](#)

[Building a Foundation of Film Theory: Text, Context and Spectator](#)

[Formalism: What is a film?](#)

[Realism: Does film reflect reality?](#)

[Reception: What is a spectator?](#)

[Shaping Society with Film: Marxism](#)

[Meeting Marx \(Karl, not Groucho\)](#)

[Spending time with the Frankfurt School: Fun is bad](#)

[Negotiating between culture and behaviour: Ideology](#)

[Taking Films to Bits: Structuralism](#)

[Linking linguistics and film: Saussure](#)

[Sampling film semiotics: Metz](#)

[Meeting mythic structures: Lévi-Strauss](#)

[Getting into Your Head: Psychoanalysis and Film](#)

[Delving into dreams: Freud and film](#)

[Leaping through the looking glass: Lacan](#)

[Rejecting the male gaze: Mulvey](#)

[Chapter 14: Praising Great Directors: Auteur Theory](#)

[Seeing the Director as God](#)

[Digging to the roots of auteur theory](#)

[Linking auteur, theme and genre](#)

[Seeing the auteur in mise-en-scène](#)

[Debunking auteur theory](#)

[Encountering Old-School Auteurs \(1930s to 1950s\)](#)

[John Ford: The American landscape](#)

[Howard Hawks: Screwball and highballs](#)

[Alfred Hitchcock: The master of suspense](#)

[Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger: Two for the price of one](#)

[Orson Welles: The self-styled genius](#)

[Meeting the Essential Modern Auteurs \(1960s to 1990s\)](#)

[Stanley Kubrick: An epic perfectionist](#)

[Martin Scorsese: Storyteller of the streets](#)

[Steven Spielberg: The kid who never grew up](#)

[Quentin Tarantino: Uber-movie-geek](#)

[David Lynch: The American nightmare](#)

[Turning Attention to 21st Century Auteurs \(1999 to today\)](#)

[Ang Lee: The hidden dragon](#)

[Christopher Nolan: Worlds within worlds](#)

[Kathryn Bigelow: Boys and their guns](#)

[Guillermo del Toro: Monster moviemaker](#)

Chapter 15: Exploring New Approaches to Film Theory - and Beyond

[Multiplying Meaning: Post-Structuralism](#)

[Discerning the difference between structuralism and post-structuralism](#)

[Deconstructing texts and discourses](#)

[Dismantling empires: Post-colonialism](#)

[Realising Nothing Matters Anymore: Postmodernism](#)

[Narrating the end of history](#)

[Getting super-excited about hyper-realism](#)

[Going for girl power! Post-feminism](#)

[Moving beyond gender: Queer theory](#)

[Reaching the End of Everything: Post-Theory?](#)

[Smashing the SLAB: Bordwell takes aim](#)

[Striking back at Bordwell](#)

[Thinking about thinking: Cognitive theory](#)

Chapter 16: Outliving Celluloid: Cinema in the 21st Century

[Revising Rumours of Cinema's Death: Still Watching, Just Differently](#)

[Cinema-going over the decades](#)

[Shifting from celluloid strips to hard disk drives](#)

[Transitioning to digital, holding onto analogue](#)

[Changing Where, How and When You Watch](#)

[Experiencing cinema nowadays](#)

[Watching films amid the comforts of home](#)

[Collapsing the release window](#)

[Converging on the Next Phase: Film and Everything Else](#)

[Reassessing event movies](#)

[Elevating everyone to film-maker status \(sort of\)](#)

[Raising the bar: TV catches up with cinema](#)

[Stealing pleasure](#)

Part V: The Part of Tens

Chapter 17: Ten Film Writers You Need to Read

[VF Perkins: Analysing Film Style](#)

[Richard Dyer: Watching Stars and Developing Queer Theory](#)

[Tom Gunning: Reassessing Early Cinema](#)

[Molly Haskell: Engaging with Feminism and Film](#)

[Yvonne Tasker: Analysing Action Cinema](#)

[Michel Chion: Speaking Up for Film Sound](#)

[Richard Maltby: Investigating Cinema History](#)

[Nicholas Rombes: Discovering Digital Cinema](#)

[Hamid Naficy: Exploring Accented Cinema](#)

[Charles Barr: Battling for British Cinema](#)

Chapter 18: Ten Must-Watch Movies

[Sherlock, Jr. \(1924\)](#)

[Casablanca \(1942\)](#)

[Singin' in the Rain \(1952\)](#)

[Rear Window \(1954\)](#)

[À Bout de Souffle \(Breathless\) \(1960\)](#)

[Don't Look Now \(1973\)](#)

[Blade Runner \(1982\)](#)

[Pulp Fiction \(1994\)](#)

[Spirited Away \(2001\)](#)

[Cidade de Deus \(City of God\) \(2002\)](#)

Chapter 19: Ten Film-Makers You Need to Know Better

[Feng Xiaogang](#)

[Alice Guy-Blaché](#)

[Ousmane Sembène](#)

[Roger Corman](#)

[Lynne Ramsay](#)

[Abbas Kiarostami](#)

[John Waters](#)

[Christine Vachon](#)

[Andrei Tarkovsky](#)

[Wong Kar-wai](#)

Chapter 20: Ten Tips for Becoming a Film Student

[Going to the Pictures Often](#)

[Making Sure You See the Classics](#)

[Watching and Re-watching](#)

[Reading about Film in Your Free Time](#)

[Thinking about What Films Mean to You](#)

[Joining a Film Studies Tribe](#)

[Not Taking Awards Too Seriously](#)

[Attending Film Festivals and Events](#)

[Developing a Love for Subtitles](#)

[Being Proud of Your Knowledge](#)

About the Author

Cheat Sheet

More Dummies Products

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 appears 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 sidebars. 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.