perspective afterward. Monaco has simply followed the tradition of beginning with a general history lesson without considering its familiarity and interest to novice students, who may skip this section because its relevance may not be immediately clear to them.

In addition, Monaco uses a wide variety of references and specialized vocabulary—the classical Trivium (4), the term “quanta” (5–6), an allusion to Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (14), as well as off-hand references to his middle-class lifestyle and classical education (“Having heard Mozart’s Piano Concerto #23 once, having drunk a single bottle of Chassagne-Montrachet 1978” [16]), all of which may alienate novice media students. (A problem I encounter when I mention Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* while lecturing on the way flashbacks are motivated in *The English Patient*, to name just one example.)

(3) **Instruction:** the ideal textbook must reflect the themes of CORE (Connect, Organize, Reflect, Extend).

Key question: How well does the text support student-centered learning?

What is the learning strategy in *How to Read a Film*? Because of the initial section, chapter 1 does not immediately connect to readers’ experiences. It is only in the section “Film, Recording, and the Other Arts” (20–43) that the reader encounters familiar, common-sense information. This is the ideal starting point, and only after that should the specialized knowledge of the expert be gradually introduced. The text is organized in a complex way, consisting of sequential and matrix structures, plus an argument, organized into a hierarchy. Because most of chapter 1 is limited almost exclusively to informing, the scope for reflecting (as well as for problem solving and understanding) is limited, with the exception of the comparisons and contrasts Monaco draws between film and natural language. Ultimately, there is little scope to extend and transfer the information in the chapter, with the exception of the comparison and contrast between film and natural language, which students can try out on other art forms.

**Conclusions.** My main criticisms of film studies textbooks are that many lack a consistent design, they do not always reflect the expert’s understanding of film studies, and they lack a consistent learning strategy. They try to be all inclusive at the expense of presenting information in a clear, rigorous, and precise manner. Film studies educators who write textbooks need to heed Whitehead’s idea not to teach too many subjects, but what one does teach should be taught thoroughly. At a time when the relevance and purpose of film and media studies are in the spotlight, we need to understand the contribution film studies can make to students’ overall education. My response is that it must promote deep learning of fundamental concepts, rather than offer a surface grasp of a shopping list of facts. Once media educators become aware of the importance of good design, of the selection criteria for the subject matter of textbooks, and of the importance of student-centered learning, they will be able to write high-quality textbooks that enable students to learn more effectively.

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**Notes**

This essay presents ideas the author discusses in a book-length investigation of film studies textbooks funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

5. Ibid., 32–37.
6. Ibid., 35.
7. Ibid., 33.
15. Monaco, *How to Read a Film*.
16. Ibid., 3.
17. Ibid., 43.
18. Ibid., 44.

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**“It’s Just a Movie”: A Teaching Essay for Introductory Media Classes**

**Greg M. Smith**

The question arises almost every semester. My introductory film class and I will be hip deep in analyzing the details of a film and a hand will creep up, usually from the back: “Aren’t we reading too much into this? After all, it’s just a movie.” Taking a deep breath, I launch into a spirited defense of our analytic activity. After five or ten minutes, the student usually has a shell-shocked, what-did-I-do-to-deserve-this look on her face.

I have never been pleased with my spur-of-the-moment justifications of film analysis, which tend to come across as a bit defensive. Worst of all, they do not deal fully with the question, which I believe is very profound. Why are we spending so much time finding new meanings in something as insignificant as a movie? Aren’t we just "reading into" the film? The student’s question deserves a fuller answer, or, rather, it deserves several answers. As a way of finding those answers, this essay extends the dialogue started by that series of brave, inquiring students in my classes.
Leaving Nothing to Chance. “All right, do you really think that every little thing in the film is there for a reason?”

Lots of things in our everyday world are there by accident. If I trip over a stone, causing me to bump into someone, the encounter is probably not part of a higher design. Random occurrences happen all the time, with no enormous significance. There is a temptation to treat a film in a similar manner, as if everything occurs by chance. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A Hollywood film is one of the most highly scrutinized, carefully constructed, least random works imaginable. Of course, we know this, having seen _Entertainment Tonight_. We all know that it takes thousands of people to create a blockbuster movie: directors, actors, grips, and gaffers. We know that producing a film is a highly coordinated effort by dedicated professionals, but to most people it is a bit of a mystery what all these people do. When we start watching a film, we are encouraged to forget about all that mysterious collective labor. A Hollywood film usually asks us to get caught up in the story, in the world that has been created, so that we are not aware of the behind-the-scenes effort. We tend to forget the thousands of minute decisions that consciously construct the artificial world that has been created.

When I put on a shirt in the morning, I do so with very little thought (as my students will tell you). By contrast, a movie character’s shirt is chosen by a professional whose job it is to think about the shirt this character would wear. Similar decisions are made for props, sound, cuts, and so on. Filmmakers work hard to exclude the random from their fictional worlds. Sets are built so that the filmmaker can have absolute control over the environment. Crews spend a great deal of time and expense between shots adjusting the lighting so that each shot will look as polished as possible. When filmmakers do want something to appear random, they carefully choreograph it. For instance, extras who are merely walking by the main characters are told where to go and what to do to appear “natural.”

“But what about directors who do not sanitize the film set, who try to let bits of the real world into their films [from the Italian neorealists to Kevin Smith, director of _Clerks_ (1994)]? What about actors like Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams who like to improvise? What about documentary filmmakers who do not script what happens in front of the camera? Don’t these directors and actors let a little bit of chance creep into film?” Not really. These strategies may allow some chance occurrences to make it into the raw footage. However, the filmmaker and the editor watch the collected footage over and over, deciding which portions of which they will assemble into the final cut of a movie. They do so with the same scrutiny that was applied to the actual filming. Even if something occurred on film without their planning for it, they make a conscious choice whether to include that chance occurrence. What was chance in the filming becomes choice in editing.

“Come on, do film professionals from editors to set designers really spend all that time scrutinizing such details?” Think of it this way: A Hollywood blockbuster may cost up to $200 million. If you were to make something that costs that much, wouldn’t you scrutinize every tiny detail? Even a “low-budget” movie can cost $10 million or so. With so much money riding on a film, there needs to be enormous scrutiny, and this extends to all levels. Of course this process, like all human effort, is fallible; mistakes sometimes creep in (for example, extras in a film set in ancient Rome may be seen wearing wristwatches). All too often, beginning film scholars have a tendency to assume that odd moments in a film are mistakes, when the opposite is more likely to be true. Nothing in a final film is there unless scores of professionals have carefully examined it. You can trust that if something is in a film, it is there for a reason.

A Movie Is Not a Telegram. “Okay, so the director really cares about the details. But do you think your interpretation is what she really meant to say?”

In high school English classes, you may have been taught to look for the meaning of a literary work, a single sentence that summarizes what the author was trying to convey. So you might have boiled Shakespeare’s _Macbeth_ down to a single sentence that reveals the moral lesson of the play (perhaps “Greed for power corrupts people”). Similarly, one can reduce a film to its message, which makes the game of interpretation fairly simple. All we have to do is figure out what the author/director was trying to say.

Some filmmakers scoff at the idea that their movies contain messages. Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn, for example, is alleged to have said, “If I wanted to send a message, I would’ve called Western Union.” What is at issue here is the conception of what communication is. The traditional understanding of speech considers a sender trying to relay a message to a receiver (often called the S-M-R model). A sender has a clear intention of what she wants to get across to the receiver, but she may not present her message particularly clearly. The receiver tries to understand the message, but she may misunderstand the sender for a variety of reasons. By comparing the sender’s intention with the receiver’s understanding, one can discover how effective the communication was. For example, if a receiver gets a telegram asking for bail money and then starts collecting the necessary cash, then a successful instance of communication has taken place.

It is tempting to conceptualize a film as communicating a message in a similar way. To find out if a film is effective, one can compare the filmmaker’s intentions with our interpretations and see if we “got” it. If a viewer did not receive the message, then perhaps the film is poorly made or perhaps the viewer is not very savvy.

Films, plays, and novels, however, are not telegrams; they are infinitely more complicated. One of the first traps that the budding critic should avoid is thinking that a film can be understood as having a single message that we either “get” or don’t get. To think this way is to treat a film like a telegram. The cinema is a richer form of communication than can be conceptualized as sender-message-receiver.

“Okay, so perhaps the filmmaker isn’t just sending a single message. Maybe she’s sending several messages. If we can figure out what those messages are, then we’ve got it, yes?”

First of all, there is a thorny question of who the film’s “author” is. Unlike a book, hundreds of people put their work into a major film. If all of them are trying to convey meaning, do we have to consider all of their combined intentions? Or if some people’s contributions are more important than others (screenwriter, actors,
director, cinematographer, producer), then can we understand a film as the sum total of their intentions?

Let's make it easy on ourselves. Assume that the author/filmmaker of a movie is the person who is in charge of coordinating all the decisions in the shooting process: the director. If we can figure out what the director intends, then we've got it, right? If we could interview Hitchcock and gain an understanding of what was going through his mind when he made Vertigo (1958), we would have a pretty solid hold on the film, yes?

But can we reduce the film to what the director consciously intended? At times we all express the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of our times without necessarily being conscious of doing so. Did Hitchcock fully understand his attitude toward blonde women, or was he propagating a widely held belief? Sometimes the ideology of our day speaks through us with little awareness on our part. In addition, we can unconsciously express personal issues as well as social attitudes. Many believe that the unconscious seeks to express painful things that we have repressed and buried within ourselves. These tensions can emerge in our everyday lives through dreams, Freudian slips, and artwork. Perhaps Hitchcock was unconsciously working through an obsession with cool, aloof women in ways that he did not even understand when he made Vertigo. Since human beings cannot be reduced to their conscious thoughts, films should not be reduced to the director's conscious intentions.

"Okay, so if we get a sense of what the director's conscious intentions are, what ideological beliefs she gained from her socialization, and what her unconscious issues are (admittedly a difficult process), then we've arrived at a well-grounded, comprehensive description of what the film is trying to communicate, right?" We have, if we stay within the sender-message-receiver model. But let's step outside that paradigm. Why should we allow the viewer to arrive at only those meanings that come directly from the sender/filmmaker? If I get meaning out of a film and apply it to my life, why should I have to check with the filmmaker to see if it's the right meaning? In other words, why should the filmmaker have more authority over my interpretation of the film than I do?

"Because she's the filmmaker. It's her movie," you may reply. I would respond, "You are the audience. It is your movie, too." If you let go of the notion that the filmmaker is trying to convey a message, then the activity of viewers is to interpret the film according to their lives, their experiences, their tastes—not the filmmaker's. That activity is just as valid as the filmmaker's. The meaning of a movie does not lie solely within the film itself but in the interaction of the film and the audience.

As we learn more and more about how audiences interpret movies, we discover the striking range of interpretations people make. If we consider those "readings" to be somehow less valid than the filmmaker's, then we lose much of the complexity of how movies work, make meaning, and provide pleasure in our society.

"Reading into" Films. "But those audiences are just reading things into the movie, right?"

Let's think about what "reading into" a movie is. "That's simple," you might reply. "It's when an audience puts things into the movie that aren't there." That certainly seems straightforward enough. But is it?

Picture yourself watching a horror film in which a group of teenagers are staying at a spooky cabin deep in the woods. It is midnight. A couple sneaks off to a back bedroom and has sex. The attractive young woman then gets up, decides that she is going to take a shower, and says that she will be right back.

You know that this woman will be toast in a matter of minutes.

But how do you know? There is nothing in the film itself that says this woman will die. The same incident (romantic rural location, sexy couple) could take place in a romantic film, and the shower would not raise any hackles. No, the knowledge of her imminent death comes from you, the experienced horror film viewer. You have "read into" the scene.

Like the characters in Scream (1996), you know that horror films operate according to a set of rules or conventions that have been established by previous films in the genre. The filmmaker depends on you to know these conventions. She knows that by sending the woman to the shower, she can create tension in the audience ("No! Don't go, you crazy girl!"). The filmmaker can toy with the audience, delaying the inevitable, because she knows that we expect the girl to be slashed. It is our job as audience members to read into the scene; filmmakers count on that.

Movies rely on the audience to supply information that is only hinted at in the film, like the shower convention in horror films. This "reading into" occurs even at the simplest levels of filmmaking. When we see a shot of someone getting into a car and driving away, followed by a shot of the car pulling into another driveway, we understand that the driver drove from one place to another. We understand this without the film actually showing us the drive. If we were limited to what was explicitly laid out in the film, if we did not read into it, then we would not be able to make basic sense out of the movie. There is really no choice of whether to read into a film or not; audiences always do.

This is not to say that you can read a movie in any way you want. Certain pieces of information are established beyond dispute. If you do not think that Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) is about an explorer/archaeologist looking for the Ark of the Covenant, then you have missed something. If you believe that it is about Arctic beekeeping, you are doing a remarkably perverse bit of reading.

Between a pedestrian reading (the driving example, which some would call an inference or expectation) and the ludicrous kind (Raiders as about Arctic beekeeping), a wide range of readings are possible. You may find some of them too much of a stretch. What I would ask is that you remain open to the possibility that some of these readings may be interesting. Do not close down your mind simply because an interpretation involves "reading into" a movie, because all film readings involve this active process. Instead, look at the movie with an open mind and see if there is evidence to support a particular interpretation. If someone says that Raiders is really about finding God, Freudian revenge on the father, or Ronald Reagan, see if there is corroborating material. Based on the film, decide if there is a case to be made for one of those interpretations.
Just a Movie. “Okay, maybe I see the value of coming up with new interpretations of Hamlet or Citizen Kane, but Raiders? Or Evil Dead 2 (1987)? Come on. Aren’t you taking all this a bit too seriously? After all, it’s just a movie.”

You would not say, “Why are you analyzing Hamlet? After all, it’s just Shakespeare.” Why is it okay to analyze Shakespeare and not Evil Dead 2? The answer has as much to do with the social status of these works as it does with the works themselves.

There was a time when the study of Shakespeare would have been questionable as being not serious enough. At first, scholars in the West did not think that anything written in English was as worthy of study as the classics written in Greek. Homer, Sophocles, and Aristotle were the serious writers whose works were taught in school, not Shakespeare’s plays or Dickens’s novels. Lawrence Levine has traced how the status of Shakespeare’s work has changed in America, from rather lowbrow in vaudeville productions to its current highbrow status. Dickens’s novels, now clearly considered classics, were serialized in newspapers as pulp fiction. In their day, to argue that Dickens’s work should be taught in schools would have seemed almost scandalous. Such trash obviously could not withstand the scrutiny applied to great works like Homer’s Odyssey, or so it seemed.

Instead of relying purely on our society’s understanding of what artworks are good enough to be taken seriously, we should instead look to the artworks themselves. If we look for rich interpretations of a work, we may find them, or we may not. The point is not to dismiss the process outright simply because it is “just a movie.” The proof is in the pudding, as the old saying goes. If your analysis produces insightful, well-grounded interpretations of a film, then it is definitely fruitful for analyzing, even if it is titled Evil Dead 2.

No one will argue that all media works are equally rich for analysis. Probably Hamlet is a more complex text than Evil Dead 2. But that should not lead us to neglect a text that is “just a movie.” You should take insight where you can get it. And even if a film is not particularly complex, it can still provide hints about the society that produced it. Events do not have to be overly complicated to yield knowledge.

For example, Robert Darnton analyzes a particularly unpromising-sounding phenomenon: a mock trial and execution of some cats by the apprentices and journeymen in a Parisian printing shop in the 1730s. What could this bizarre, sadistic, and unusual ritual possibly tell us about eighteenth-century French society? Reading closely, Darnton shows how this odd ceremony reveals much about the relationship between workers and bosses, the sexual and class structures of the society, and the tradition of a craft. His essay demonstrates that even slight cultural artifacts bear the imprint of the society that made them. Examining a film can give us clues about the meanings and assumptions shared by the members of a culture. If a mock trial of cats can reveal social interrelationships, then an uncomplicated film that does not appear to warrant much aesthetic scrutiny can be examined for its social insights. All cultural products carry cultural meaning.

Ruining the Movie. Part of the resistance to applying analytic tools to a film like Evil Dead 2 is the belief that such analysis will kill the pleasure of watching the movie. After all, movies are intended to be “mere entertainment.” We have already dealt with the question of the filmmaker’s intention, so let’s not deal further with whether we should be limited to the filmmaker’s conception of the film as “mere entertainment.” Instead, let’s deal with the fear that analyzing a film will destroy the simple pleasure of watching it.

Sometimes it seems that the surest way to ruin a good book is to have to read it for a class. English classes are supposed to make you read things that you would not normally pick up yourself. They force you to read Chaucer or James Joyce, and the hope is that in the process of analyzing these works you’ll gain insight into your life. But that is very different from reading Michael Crichton or John Grisham. In the latter case, reading is an escape. If we start thinking too hard about airport novels or mainstream films, doesn’t it ruin them?

When people learn that I study the media for a living, they frequently ask, “Are you ever able to just sit back and enjoy a movie, or are you always analyzing it?” The question never rings true because it is phrased as either/or. For me, it is not a matter of substituting cerebral analysis for visceral pleasure; I experience both simultaneously. I can still root for the good guy while admiring a film’s editing and thinking about the plot’s social ramifications. Similarly, after taking media studies classes, students should be able to add the pleasures of analysis to the pleasures of moviegoing.

I realize that as you are taking an introductory film analysis class, there may not seem to be much pleasure in analysis. It probably seems more like tedious, difficult work. At first, it may seem that you are losing the pleasurable experience of the movie as you dissect it, but as you get better at film analysis, you will be able to recombine those activities. The end result, I believe, is a richer kind of pleasure. I believe that I respond more fully to movies than I did before I started analyzing them. I now feel joy at a well-composed shot, a tautly constructed narrative structure, and an innovative social commentary, as well as the simpler pleasure of finding out who done it. The outcome we hope for in a film analysis class is not to ruin film watching but to increase the complexity of enjoyment.

“Why do that? Why tinker with the simple pleasure of watching a movie?” This question goes to the foundation of what education is. The basic faith underlying education is that an examined life is better, richer, and fuller than an unexamined life. How do we really know that self-examination is better than the bliss of simple ignorance? Like most statements of faith, there is no way to prove it. But by being in a college classroom, you have allied yourself with those of us who believe that if you do not examine the forces in your life, you will become subject to them. You can go through life merely responding to movies, but if you are an educated person, you will also think about them, about what they mean, and how they are constructed. In so doing, you may experience pleasures and insights that you could not have obtained any other way. This is the promise of the educated life in reading, in living, and in watching movies.

Notes
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Archival News

edited by Eric Schaefer and Dan Streible

Acquisitions • The San Francisco Media Archive has received several hundred videotapes from the Stanford University Speakers Bureau. The tape donations contain original camera masters of important cultural, political, literary, and scientific figures who have spoken at the university, such as Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and William H. Rehnquist, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Gary Snyder.

The Martin Luther King School in Berkeley, California, also donated more than one hundred instructional filmstrips and accompanying LP vinyl records, cassettes, and instructional manuals to the archive. The filmstrips, from 1961 to 1976, deal with a wide range of subjects, from drug use in America (“LSD: The Acid World”) to world politics (“Russia: 50 Years of Revolution”). The 35mm filmstrip, screened in conjunction with a vinyl LP and later a cassette tape, was a widely used teaching tool in classrooms in the 1960s. Along with 16mm instructional films, the 35mm filmstrip has long been forgotten, having been replaced by videotape and computer-based learning technologies. Many of the donated filmstrips contain concise factual information, while others, sponsored by companies such as Procter and Gamble and Pacific Gas and Electric, are thinly disguised promotional pieces.

The San Francisco Media Archive has close to five hundred 35mm filmstrips and accompanying manuals in its collection. The archive has also launched a Web site, at <www.sfm.org/>, that will include a searchable database.

The UCLA Film and Television Archive has received a large collection of 16mm prints of Hollywood features and shorts from the estate of the late singer Mel Tormé. The donation also includes some rare television programs. The archive has also entered into a joint preservation project with director John Sayles to preserve his earliest features. Sayles placed material from The Return of the Secaucus 7 (1980), Lianna (1983), The Brother from Another Planet (1984), and Matewan (1987) with the archive.

In addition, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences donated 316 programs nominated for the 51st Annual Primetime Emmy Awards. Danny Thomas Productions deposited more than three hundred 16mm episodes of The Danny Thomas Show (aka Make Room for Daddy), which ran from 1953 to 1964 on ABC and CBS. Other programs included in the deposit were NBC's 4 Star Revue, All Star Revue, The Danny Thomas Hour, and ten variety specials spanning Thomas's career at NBC from 1950 to 1968. Johnny Carson donated 16mm kinescopes of The Johnny Carson Show, which ran on CBS during the 1955–1956 season, as well as episodes of the game show he hosted, Who Do You Trust? Jane Abbott, widow of actor Philip Abbott, donated 16mm kinescopes of her husband's work from the mid-1950s, and KABC deposited a selection of local public-affairs programming from the 1990s.