

## Film as Form

What is form? Think of **form** as the way the different parts of an artwork relate to each other and how they come together to make up the whole. We are conceiving of the artwork as a *system*.

This book has two major emphases. One is analyzing a film as a *film*, really digging into the particulars of what makes it a film versus being a work in another medium, such as literature or theater. The second emphasis is *seeing the whole in terms of the parts and seeing the parts in terms of the whole*. There's a half-hour French film titled *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) that consists almost entirely of still images. Only a single shot, lasting six seconds, contains movement in the sense of what we understand a motion picture to do most fundamentally. In it a woman blinks her eyes. It's a moment that can leave a viewer moved and even awestruck. Suppose you told your friend, "I saw this movie last night, and there was a scene where a woman blinks her eyes, and her eyes *actually move!* It was awesome." Your friend would look at you as though you were crazy. The point is that the extraordinary thing about this moment only makes sense if you look at it in the context of the whole film. Looking at the whole film in terms of its parts involves grounding your analysis in the concrete specifics of the film you are examining.

This book describes a way of looking at films, an approach and a philosophy, and everything in it turns on this idea of form.

People enjoy seeing how the parts of something fit together. In *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) Han Solo comes flying out of nowhere and blasts Darth Vader's ship, giving Luke Skywalker a clear shot at destroying the Death Star. But, of course, Han doesn't really come out of nowhere. We know this character. We've seen

him before. We like him. The film has coaxed us temporarily to forget about him, but when he returns, it's like the pleasurable feeling one experiences when a jigsaw puzzle piece drops into place. The character belongs there. The parts fit together. This is form.

Now, if people enjoy artworks that convey a sense of themselves as robustly complete, a film can tap into this desire and satisfy it. A film that does this is *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), when, in the final minutes, the whole film snaps into a new and super-crisp focus. We learn something that assigns new meanings to almost everything that has come before. The film turns out to have a tighter organization, to be more systematic, than we thought. If people love this film, this is a big reason why.

But a filmmaker can *frustrate* this desire as well, in ways that can be just as interesting and worthwhile as the happiest ending of the most mainstream blockbuster movie. Both kinds of film exhibit form equally, and both kinds will reward close study.

## A VIEWER-CENTERED APPROACH

A common way to understand form is to set it off against “content.” The form/content distinction is so widespread in discussions of films and other artworks that many people take it as a given. But, while some academic writing and other serious discussions make this distinction, I am going to suggest that there are benefits to putting it aside and understanding form in an entirely different way.

Refraining from discussing content won't limit us in what we can say about a film. This is because anything a person might call “content” will be something we'll include in our discussion of form. Suppose by “content” someone means a film's story. A little man with big hairy feet goes on a journey to destroy an evil ring. That's content. But we're going to call that *narrative*, the topic of the next chapter, where we'll view narrative as deeply and inextricably a part of form. Others might mean *subject matter*, World War I, say. But everything in a film that might *represent*

this subject matter—costumes, trenches, guns, dialogue, even archival footage of the actual war—will all be things that we will identify as elements of form. World War I isn't "inside" this film, isn't a part of it, any more than Middle Earth is inside Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or J. R. R. Tolkien's books are inside it. The same real-world event or work of literature can inspire many films, but these films won't all share a common core material that is a war or a book. And finally, what if by *content* someone means *meaning*? This chapter will have a lot to say about meaning, but for now I'll just say that we won't be calling it content.

It's all form—which is good, because this means that nothing in a film is outside the scope of your analysis. Well, there are three other things, besides content, that I will suggest you can fruitfully avoid when analyzing a film. We get to these later in the chapter. But first, if we're not understanding form by opposing it to content, how are we understanding it?

We'll see a strong relationship between form and *expectations*. Whose? Those of viewers. There are many kinds of approach to film analysis. Here you'll learn about one that is *formalist* and also *viewer centered*. Another kind is author centered, which we will consider briefly when we get to films and *function* later in the chapter.

Broadly speaking, viewer expectations can come from two places: (1) the work itself, the film; and (2) outside the film, our daily experiences, including our experience of watching other films.

If I say "knock knock," you'll say, "Who's there?" You can participate in the joke—you can, in a sense, help make it "happen"—because you've heard other knock-knock jokes and know what to say. This knowledge is external to the joke and helps you make sense of it. In fact, without this knowledge there is no joke at all.

Now, if in answer to your "Who's there?" I say, "Cash," and you say, "Cash who?" and I say, "No thanks, but I'd like some peanuts," your expectation—that "Cash" is at the door—comes not from past experiences but from the joke itself.

The joke *cued* you to have this expectation.

The interplay between these two kinds of expectation, ones coming from outside the text and ones coming from inside it, is something you can look for and ask questions about when watching a film.

More about the expectations we bring to films. You go to a musical. You expect to see people breaking into song and dance as you don't in life. If you've never seen a musical before, your reaction might not be, "Oh, they're falling in love," but, "What's happening? I don't get this at all." Again, what viewers know coming to a film plays a role in helping to make the film "happen."

Viewer expectations will be part of our understanding of form and of what films are and what they do.

## CONVENTIONS AND GENRES

One way film form and viewer expectations interact is through *conventions*. A **convention** is a trait that is shared by many artworks and that we don't see, or see nearly as often, in real life. Viewers are able to understand a convention in part because they've seen it before in other films. For this reason, we can think about a convention as a way films relate, through viewers, to other films.

The number of film conventions one could list is endless. Here are four:

- A man and woman meet and instantly hate each other. If this is a romantic comedy, they'll probably fall in love.
- The mad genius doesn't get away with his diabolical scheme.
- The car explodes in slow motion.
- The underdog sports team comes from behind at the last second and wins the big game.

Another way to understand conventions is to say they can help us distinguish movie reality from actual reality. Consider the ticking-time-bomb scenario. A captured suspect possesses some secret information, and if his interrogators can only find it out—under what bridge the bomb

is wired, say—many innocent lives will be saved. If it's hard to find examples of a time when such a scenario ever played out in real life, it happens every week on TV and in one big-screen action thriller after another. The scenario belongs more to movie reality than to the one we live in. In real life, if two people meet and instantly hate each other, chances are they'll just go on hating each other.

As many of my examples suggest, conventions can point strongly to certain types of films. If you're watching a film featuring a protagonist, maybe a private investigator, who's visited by a sultry woman who asks for his help and who might be secretly treacherous, you're probably watching a film noir (or a parody of one). Film noir is an example of a **film genre**. Most moviegoers are familiar with genres of many kinds—action-adventure, romantic comedy, westerns, and so on. Conventions can be spotted in every kind of film, but genre films are loaded with them to distinctive degrees. Let's consider an example.

In the science fiction film *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, US/Australia, 1999), the hero, Neo, decides to face the evil Agent Smith. The scene is a deserted subway. Trinity, the female protagonist, who loves Neo, has just made her narrow escape. She is no wallflower, but the telephone link that would allow her to return to his side has just been severed. It's a convention of many kinds of film that the hero must face his nemesis alone. Obi-Wan's ghost, in *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), tells Luke: "If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere." One could argue that the rules of movie showdowns between good and bad guys govern Obi-Wan's exclusion from this confrontation as much as any logic internal to the Star Wars universe does. Likewise excluded, Trinity urges, "Run, Neo, run." The woman, helpless on the sidelines, fears for her man's safety. But he's going to stand firm. That this scenario is far from original makes it no less compelling.

When Neo doesn't run, Trinity asks his mentor, Morpheus, "What's he doing?" Morpheus replies, "He's beginning to believe." Viewers feel a surge of gratification as well as anticipation at this line. Since long before Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and the cinema itself, the protagonist



1.1 *The Matrix*. Hero and villain square off in a classic western gunfight configuration.

who turns out to be, at the moment of truth, The One has been a staple of many kinds of story.

Then the two face off, and the invocation of genre conventions becomes more explicit. The camera shoots past the hips and hands first of Smith and then of Neo (1.1). This is a subway, not a street in a western, but the newspaper pages blowing past call tumbleweeds to mind with enough vividness to clinch the association. Without breaking the dramatic tension, the film has placed us in the O.K. Corral. The shots of ready fingers inches from triggers, the stillness of the moment just before the gunslingers draw, the tumbleweed-like trash—all of this is **genre iconography**, which is imagery (or sounds) we recognize from one genre film to the next that both helps to make the films more meaningful and coherent and helps to bind the genre together. Swinging saloon doors, space helmets, full moons accompanied by howling wolves, and action heroes coolly walking toward the camera in slow motion while something big explodes in the background are all examples of genre iconography.

The sequence continues to unspool a tissue of conventions and spin them into new combinations, from the “bullet time” slow-motion special effect (new in 1999 but now a convention, and even cliché, of films and video games) to, when the two finally land, both learning at the same time that their guns are empty. Then hand-to-hand combat ensues, and

the acrobatic fighting sparks connections to Asian martial arts cinema, a genre to which the film owes an undisguised debt.

To sum up, film form relates to viewer expectations, and infiltrating both expectations and form, in genre and other sorts of films, are conventions.

### THREE KINDS OF RESPONSE

Form also bears on viewer emotions. Of the different sorts of feelings a viewer might experience while watching a film, one is **curiosity**. Someone in a film is carrying a box. The other characters are greatly interested in its contents. We might be inclined to wonder what's in the box, to feel curious.

When thinking about how films cue us to experience emotions, it's tempting, and often productive, to look at the emotions the characters are experiencing and to ask how we're being encouraged to mirror these feelings. Such a response is a function of the extent to which we **identify** with the characters as they (and we) move through a story. But viewers respond to the whole film, not just the characters, and our emotional experiences can differ greatly from those of the characters, even ones we care about deeply. Returning to the box scenario, maybe all the characters know what's in the box, but we don't. So our curiosity is not theirs. This is important because, again, we want to think about how the whole film is cueing us to experience emotions and not just how the characters are doing it.

Curiosity is one response. We'll spend more time considering two others: *suspense* and *surprise*. These terms can help you think in precise ways about how films shape the viewing experience from moment to moment.

**Suspense** hinges on a delay in an outcome we are anticipating. The film makes us wait for what we think, and sometimes are pretty sure, is going to happen. Will James Bond defuse the bomb? Probably, and he does, but not until the last five minutes of the film. In the meantime we



**1.2** *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Has Indy made it?



**1.3** Yes he has.

feel emotionally connected to the story. Suspense is a powerful means by which films elicit our emotional involvement.

In contrast to suspense, **surprise** results when a film leads us to expect one thing and something else happens instead.

With these two terms in mind, let's turn to some films. Which would you use to characterize this moment in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984)? The rope bridge across the chasm has snapped, a terrific hand-to-hand battle has ensued on the dangling bridge, and all the bad guys have fallen into the river—but has Indy survived? The camera lingers on the empty frame (**1.2**). Then Indy's hand slowly comes into view as he climbs up, and then we see that in

his other hand he holds the sacred stone he has recovered from the vanquished evil cult (1.3).

Let's look at how this sequence elicits suspense:

- We see an empty frame, with much of the visual field out of focus. We're used to watching films with people front and center, and in focus, so this image, on this basic level, is priming us to expect that something, probably our hero, will imminently come into view.
- Viewers who've seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981) know that *Temple of Doom* is a prequel. They know Indy has further adventures, so they expect him to have survived this battle on the bridge.
- Even viewers who haven't seen *Raiders* know that *Temple of Doom* is an adventure story featuring a bigger-than-life hero who survives one perilous scrape after another. We know that these kinds of heroes in these kinds of films tend to prevail and that the one in this film probably will as well.

Our expectations are satisfied, but we have to wait. This is suspense.

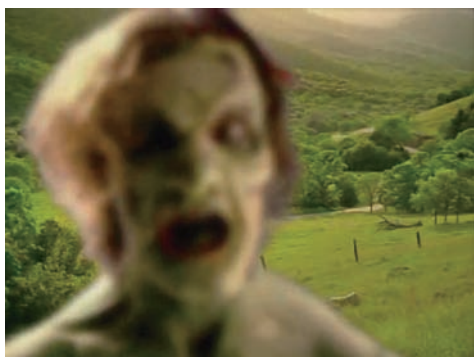
Now consider this German TV commercial for a caffeinated beverage. To tranquil music the camera glides right as it follows a car moving in the same direction on the road below. In the first image the car is about to go behind a tree (1.4). The car disappears and the camera continues moving to the right, but then the music is abruptly replaced by a shriek as a figure bolts into view from the opposite direction (1.5).

Let's consider how this commercial elicits surprise:

- Placid music accompanies the gliding rightward movement of the camera as we watch, on a distant green landscape that's in focus, a car moving in the same direction.
- When the car goes behind a tree, we expect it to come out the other side.
- Instead, we're confronted with several sharp contrasts. A figure, not far away and in focus but very close and out of focus, enters the frame moving right to left, which jolts us, as we've been



**1.4** TV ad for “K-Fee Turbo-drink.” The car is about to go behind a tree.



**1.5** Instead of the car emerging from the other side, this figure darts in from the right.

following the camera's and car's left-to-right movement. And instead of placid music, we have the incredibly loud shriek of this ghoulish figure.

- This commercial imitates conventions of car commercials we've seen before. One might have been waiting for a voice to say something about excellent gas mileage and expert road handling. This miniature film has tapped into our prior experiences to knock us off guard.

A final example comes from a scene in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). Vincent Vega is a character in this anthology of three stories that all take place at the same time and in the same milieu, and with, up to this point, only minimal and inconsequential overlapping of characters



**1.6** *Pulp Fiction*. Butch finds the gun.



**1.7** Vincent comes out of the bathroom.

and events across the stories. We've seen the segment featuring Vincent. Now we're watching the one featuring Butch Coolidge, who, even though he knows gunmen are after him, has returned to his residence to retrieve a prized possession.

Butch finds a gun on his kitchen counter (**1.6**). Then he hears a toilet flush behind him. Vincent comes out of the bathroom (**1.7**). A tense moment follows, after which Butch mows Vincent down.

Let's look at this sequence in light of our two terms:

- By keeping the segments mostly insulated from one another, the film has led us to expect that there won't be major convergences

of plotlines and characters across the stories. We're surprised by this confrontation and its violent outcome. Who would expect Vincent to be in the bathroom, and, even more shocking, to die? This isn't even his story!

- We came to know and like Vincent in the segment featuring him. And now we like Butch and are rooting for him. The film has taken a major character from another story and suddenly planted him in this story, running one protagonist right up against another. How do we feel? Is Vincent now the bad guy? That seems wrong. Should Butch die? That would be terrible. Viewers are caught in a carefully laid and, compared to the way most narrative films work, unusual trap. The rareness of the situation helps to make it all the more unexpected.
- We feel surprise. However, once the characters face off, the sequence becomes charged with an emotion of a different kind. Now viewers are burning with a single question: will Butch kill Vincent? We wait. This is suspense. The toaster pastry Butch popped in before he found the gun, and which we've forgotten about, springs up just before the gun fires, functioning simultaneously as a little surprise dotting the scene and, when it ejects from the toaster (with its built-in timer), as a reminder that the waiting interval it punctuates has been thick with an atmosphere of suspense.

There are as many kinds of emotional response as there are individual viewers and individual moments in films, but curiosity, suspense, and surprise are three kinds you will encounter often.

## MEANING

Another way viewers respond to films is to find meaning in them. Film students do as well, but here the activity you'll be engaging in will be different from that of a casual viewer. To write a film essay is to enter into a relationship with a film that is more creative, and more aggressive,