CHAPTER 1
FILM AS ART: CREATIVITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND BUSINESS

Chapter Outline

Art vs. Entertainment? Art vs. Business?
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   Making Films with Photographic Film
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Making the Movie: Film Production
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   The Preparation Phase
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   Artistic Implications of the Production Process
A Closer Look: Some Terms and Roles in Film Production
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Summary

Teaching “Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business”

The Purpose of the Chapter

Why include a unit on the technological and business aspects of the movies in a course on basic film appreciation? Film Art is not intended to teach students how to make films or break into the industry (though it is occasionally used in introductory filmmaking classes). Rather, Chapter 1 is designed in part to get students thinking about films as made objects that they can analyze and understand more deeply. It also aims to explain briefly the complex processes necessary before they walk into a theater and see a film on the screen.
Most people have some passing awareness of film production. In recent years, short documentaries on the making of various movies have been increasingly used for advertising purposes, and the spread of “infotainment” programs on cable television has meant that behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with filmmakers are increasingly used to publicize new releases. With the spread of DVD (Digital Video Disc) technology, supplements are often included with a disc discussing some aspects of production. Hundreds of Internet sites provide similar information, and any important release will have its own website. Today’s young viewers are probably more aware of the production process than at any other time in film history. Despite all these sources, however, most viewers probably tend to forget such information when they are actually caught up in the viewing experience.

Moreover, many basic facts about filmmaking do not receive attention in behind-the-scenes glimpses. Such sources tend to focus on special effects, production design, and acting. Lighting, camera placement, editing, and other techniques usually receive less attention. For example, many people assume that all the scenes in films are made using several cameras; in reality, most scenes are put together from shots taken by one or two cameras, moved between takes to different places in the setting. Only when one realizes this fact do the complexities of continuity editing and sound mixing become apparent.

By learning such facts, students can start from the beginning of the course to think about the various techniques that go into filmmaking. Through the section discussing Michael Mann’s film *Collateral* they can become aware that filmmakers have an enormous variety of possibilities open to them and constantly make choices. Thus later in the semester, when they study the chapters on individual film techniques (mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound), students may be better prepared to see them as functioning as part of a larger system—the film as a unified construct.

Much of the information about film production that is available to the public concentrates on individual films. Another aim of Chapter 1 is to give students a general introduction to the script-to-screen workings of the industry as a whole. The movies presented in theaters are not simply the products of dedicated teams of filmmakers. In large-scale production, films are often financed by huge corporations involved in many other aspects of entertainment and other industries.

In teaching how the film industry is dominated by huge corporations, it would be helpful to show how distribution companies are owned by multinational corporations devoted to leisure activities. Discussing the impact of Sony purchasing Columbia pictures and Loews Theaters (since acquired by AMC Theaters) would allow the student to understand the interrelation of distribution, exhibition, and merchandising.

Similarly, that sector of the film industry that deals with distribution seldom draws the public’s attention. Yet, as our section, “Distribution: The Center of Power,” describes, the process of publicizing and disseminating the industry’s product has an enormous impact on what films are available to the public and how they are perceived.
All students are familiar with the experience of seeing films in theaters, yet they may have little knowledge of how such businesses operate. (The crucial role of the concession stand, for example, almost always comes as an intriguing surprise to the average moviegoer.) Chapter 1 aims to make your students more aware of how the industry as a whole operates.

As the means of distributing films via video and computer formats multiply, the line between cinema and video is becoming blurred. Yet Film Art assumes that films originate as art works on celluloid, designed to be projected onto a screen. (For that reason, our frame enlargements are all made directly from films, not from video copies.) Chapter 1 aims to inform the student about the main differences between the two media.

Lecturing On and Discussing Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business

We tend to think of the U. S. film industry as centered in Hollywood and New York, but in fact its branches spread out into smaller cities and towns all over the country. Any town with a movie theater or a small filmmaking firm is involved in the film industry. Even if your school is not in a city, your town or one nearby is likely to have firms making advertisements, instructional documentaries, or animated films. By the same token, although famous filmmakers tend to work on feature films based in large cities, there are many kinds of filmmakers all over the country. Your local theater's manager and projectionist are film professionals. Your own teaching institution may have filmmaking courses or a television station with staffs of specialists. Thus you may find ways to bring local members of the industry into your class.

As we describe in Film Art, the same basic stages of production and series of tasks are used in many different types of films. Filmmakers are often happy to lecture on their craft, and it may even be possible to arrange for your students to tour a film facility and see how equipment, like editing stations and sound mixing boards, is used.

Similarly, you may be able to establish cordial relations with a local theater manager who might be willing to lecture to your class or host a behind-the-scenes tour. The manager of a video store or a representative from an online streaming company could also provide insights into the way that side of the distribution business works. Such business people are often aware of the advantages of fostering film education in their communities and can often be very cooperative.

One useful way to teach Chapter 1 is to undertake a case study. That is, you can show a film and lecture and/or assign a reading on the making of that film. An increasing number of books and articles detail the production phases of major films, focusing in part on the work of the film professionals as described in the chapter.

For example, Rudy Behlmer's America's Favorite Movies: Behind the Scenes (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) contains a series of studies of the production processes
for several American classics. Each is concise enough to assign as a reading. The films included are *Frankenstein* (1931), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Gunga Din*, *Stagecoach* (1939), *Casablanca*, *Laura*, *All About Eve*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The African Queen*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and *High Noon*. Other brief studies of the production backgrounds of classic films can be found in the series, “Rutgers Films in Print,” currently appearing from Rutgers University Press. As of this writing there are more than twenty of these volumes, covering such films as *Bringing Up Baby*, *Breathless*, and *The Maltese Falcon*. Each contains a brief production history and a shot-by-shot breakdown of the entire film, as well as a collection of reprinted essays and interviews relating to the film.

One possibility is to begin your semester with a case study of the making of *The Wizard of Oz* (using the Harmetz book), since this film is also used as a major example of film form in Chapter 2. Another is to begin with *Citizen Kane* (using the Carringer book), since this film is the central example in Chapter 3 on narrative form, and is further discussed in Chapter 8 on film style. You could then show *Kane* again the week you teach Chapter 3; students can benefit from two viewings of such a complex film.

With the explosion of “Making of” documentaries, books, and Internet sites you could choose not to do a case study in class. Instead you could give your students a choice of recent films to study on their own.

**Assigning a Paper on Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business**

You may wish to assign students to choose a recent film and write a research paper on its production (ideally from preproduction to distribution). Periodicals that regularly cover various aspects of film production include: *Variety* (business), *American Cinematographer* (case studies of cinematography), *Cinefex* (detailed case studies of special effects in film). Online sites that also cover film production include: *Variety; Hollywood Reporter; ScreenDaily; and Deadline Hollywood*. Certain films obviously receive more extensive coverage than others. For example, the first animated feature created entirely through computer imaging, *Toy Story*, was widely discussed in both the specialist and the popular press.

The local exhibition scene in your town offers another excellent opportunity to assign your students simple original research projects likely to interest them. Depending on the size of your town and how many theaters it has, you might assign each student or a team of students to keep a journal on a theater or a single screen in a multiplex. Depending on the extent of the project, they could keep track of what films play and for how long and perhaps also how they are advertised in local papers and online. Some popular films play on two or even three screens in a multiplex during the initial weeks of their release, and then move to only one. Films with disappointing box-office returns may be relegated to a smaller auditorium or play only a few evening screenings while the same screen is used in the afternoon for children’s matinees. Tracing such patterns and trying to explain them can teach students a great deal about both distribution and exhibition.
Another possible assignment would be for a student to keep a journal on the national and perhaps international distribution and exhibition of a single film for most of a semester. The student could trace box-office results, number of theaters the film plays in week by week, and the coverage of the film in the popular and specialist press. *(Variety* deals with this kind of information in a detailed but accessible way, and even *Entertainment Weekly* is often a surprisingly good source for material on the film industry.)*

Finally, you might consider assigning your students to compare the theatrical version of a film with the same film as shown on broadcast television. Focusing on differences of format, sound track, and even content of individual shots draws students into a closer concentration of film technique, even if they have not yet read chapters 4 through 7. Obviously it would be best to choose a film in which significant differences are likely to occur, owing to violent or controversial content. We mention *The Silence of the Lambs* as one such film, but others are easy to find.