Film Theory and Approaches to Criticism,
or, What did that movie *mean*?

By Christopher P. Jacobs

Movies are entertainment. Movies are documents of their time and place. Movies are artistic forms of self-expression. Movies we see at theatres, on television, or home video are typically *narrative* films. They tell stories about characters going through experiences. But what are they really about? What is the *content* of a film?

DIGGING DEEPER: FOUR LEVELS OF MEANING

Recounting the plot of a movie, telling what happens, is the simplest way to explain it to someone else. But this is neither a film *review* nor a film *analysis*. It's merely a synopsis that anyone else who sees or has seen the movie will likely agree with. This level of content may be called the **referential** content, since it refers directly to things that happen in the plot and possibly to some aspects of the story that are merely implied by the plot. In John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), four men from the city go on a weekend canoe trip that unexpectedly becomes a life or death struggle for survival of man against man and man against nature. Some characters survive, others don't. Most films can be analyzed more thoroughly to reveal deeper levels of meaning.

A *review* (perhaps 400-1200 words) typically includes personal impressions and evaluations of a movie's content and techniques. A good review may be subjective, yet still touch superficially on topics that might be explored in more detail in a longer formal analysis. An *analysis* (perhaps 1200-12,000 words) attempts to determine how the film actually uses various cinematic techniques and elements of film or narrative form to make a viewer react in a certain way and why it makes viewers come away with certain opinions about it. Serious film criticism, whether essays written for magazines, journals, books, or class assignments, attempts to analyze films, rather than merely review them or provide simple descriptions of what happens. An analysis requires some reflective thought about the film, and usually benefits from multiple viewings and outside research.

Most films include lines of dialogue and depict obvious developments of character that explicitly communicate meaning to the viewers. **Explicit** content is perhaps some sort of "moral of the story"

or socio-political attitude that the filmmaker is expressing directly through the mouths and actions of the characters. Some reasons the men in *Deliverance* give for taking the canoe trip include friendship and camaraderie, proving their manhood, and experiencing nature before it is destroyed by industrial development. As the plot develops, they also express personal attitudes about life and law and survival, which the writer and director obviously want the audience to think about. We also see explicitly how construction of a new dam is affecting the wilderness as well as human settlements.

A slightly deeper level of interpretation is **implicit** content, which may be less obvious but can still be inferred by seeing how the characters change, grow, and develop throughout the course of the film. Issues and ideas dealing with general human relations (rather than those specific to individual characters) may be fairly easy to recognize but are not explicitly stated by the characters. Sometimes implicit meanings are less obvious, and different viewers might interpret the same thing in different ways, depending upon their own experiences and expectations. In *Deliverance* we see implicitly the change in one character from being a passive follower after he is accidentally thrust into a leadership position. We see another character's casual attitude about casual sex change drastically after a traumatic experience in the woods. We see all four men force to contend with unexpected dangers in ways that imply how differently individuals can deal with the same events and suggest that certain compromises in one's ideals may need to be made in order to survive. It could even be possible to infer that the four central characters are separate personifications of conflicting values that might exist within a single individual. Such a literary technique allows an author (and viewer/reader) in effect to argue with himself over what the best or most practical course of action would be under comparable circumstances, and what different decisions might lead to. One could also identify instances of dramatic irony and argue whether certain events are meant to be considered "poetic justice" for the characters involved.

Implicit, explicit, and referential interpretations are based entirely on the film as a self-contained work, on "internal evidence." It is also possible to find richer meaning in a film, meaning deduced by knowing something about its creators and the time and place it was created, meaning from "external evidence" that is not possible to identify exclusively from the film itself. Sometimes this type of meaning is intentional on the part of the filmmakers, and other times it may be unconsciously incorporated into the story. Analyzing a film on this level is treating the film as a *symptom* of a much greater influence than simple dramatic concerns for the characters and their actions. A **symptomatic** interpretation looks at the film as part of the broad context of society, reflecting and illustrating themes prevalent in the culture, in the time and place it was made, and possibly in the creator's personal life experience. This level of interpretation tries to recognize symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as *metaphors* for something else, or possibly seeing the entire story as an *allegory* about something else. *Deliverance* is an outdoor adventure and journey story set in the American south, but many critics looked at it as an allegory for the disastrous American experience in Vietnam, which was still going on when the film was made. Men conditioned by modern urban civilization believe they're more or less invincible as they travel into a rural environment inhabited by a less technologically advanced culture of backwoods people they look down upon. However, they soon discover the more primitive people can be more dangerous than they expected, they must do things they were not prepared to do to survive, not everyone gets out alive, and those that do are forever haunted by the experience. The movie *District 9* (2009) is a science fiction action-thriller, but this Oscar-nominated and internationally popular South African production by Neill Blomkamp is also symptomatic of late 20th and early 21st century attitudes towards immigration, minorities, government and corporate policies, the news media, and documentary filmmaking.

FIGURING IT OUT: APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

Identifying the content, whether explicit, implicit, or symptomatic, with a certain attitude you perceive the film takes (whether by its writer and/or its director), is an interpretation of its **ideological** meaning. Many films are overt attempts by their filmmakers to persuade audiences to their points of view. Others are more interested in raising various issues for audiences to think about. These may be less heavy-handed in supporting one view or another, and sometimes even come across as ambivalent, depicting opposing viewpoints as each having valid concerns and each having their good and bad points. Still other films express obvious socio-political views through their characters, but may appear to contradict them through the actions and ultimate resolutions of the plot, possibly to keep them marketable to a wider public while still raising awareness of the issues. It's up to viewers and critics to determine whether a film is effective at achieving some or all of its intentions, and sometimes even what those intentions might be. Analysis from a variety of approaches can help a viewer realize just what a film is trying to do, and to appreciate it more, whether or not one agrees with it.

Once people realized that films could do much more than provide simple entertainment, a variety of theories and approaches were developed to help analyze films in order to understand how they created responses in viewers and just what they might mean. Different approaches examine different aspects of a film for different reasons.

A **formalist** approach looks at the film itself, its structure and form. Thus, while other approaches often use some degree of external evidence to analyze a film, a formalist approach will focus primarily on internal evidence. This approach might analyze how the way the plot presents the story material forces the viewer to see things at certain times and have reactions that might be different if presented some other way. A *narrative* analysis will examine how a film employs various narrative formal elements (such as character, setting, repetition/variation, chronological structure, etc.) to convey meaning to the viewer. Analysis of specific formal *techniques* might concentrate on a film's use of *mise en scene*, photographic composition, camera movements, editing choices, sound in relation to the image, etc., noting the effect of those techniques on how the viewer perceives the scenes and interprets what they mean.

A **realist** approach examines how a film represents "reality." Some films attempt to make techniques "invisible" to viewers so the characters and situations are always the primary focus. Others attempt to use cinematic techniques to replicate a certain type of reality the filmmaker wants the audience to experience -- love, aging, memory, insanity, drug use, etc. Some films are more concerned with creating moods and emotional impressions than with depicting a traditionally plotted story with an obvious beginning, middle, and end. These films may be attempting to convey a type of reality important to their creators, hoping that viewers will pick up on it, but non-mainstream use of techniques and non-standard structure may require a concerted effort on the part of a viewer to understand, multiple viewings, or even an explanation by the filmmaker. Look, for example, at the unusual films written or directed by Charlie Kaufmann, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Synechdoche New York, Adaptation,* and *Being John Malkovich*. Earlier films that might benefit from this approach to analysis include *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

A **contextualist** approach to analysis always considers a film as part of some broader context. This can be society at large (as in the symptomatic interpretations mentioned above), the particular culture, time, and place that created it (a **culturalist** approach), the director's personal life and

previous body of work (an **auteurist** approach that assumes the director is the "author" of a film), or various psychological and/or ideological contexts. A **psychological** approach often identifies plot elements with theories of psychologists like Freud or Jung, looking for sexual symbolism, treatment of the subconscious, representations of the id, ego, and superego, etc. The **dualist** approach looks for pairs of opposites (male-female, good-evil, light-dark, urban-rural, young-old, etc.), possibly identifying them as symbolic of contrasting tendencies in society or human nature itself. A **feminist** analysis concentrates on the portrayals of women in a film -- are they strong, weak, stereotypes, protagonists, antagonists, etc. A **Marxist** critic will attempt to associate characters and events in a film as representative of class struggle, labor vs. management, poor vs. rich, oppressive governments, and other Marxist sociopolitical concerns. A **generic** approach looks at a film as a representative of a genre, comparing it with other films from the same genre and finding meaning by identifying shared symbolic motifs or variations from the expected formula. This is especially useful when a film intentionally subverts or inverts various elements of traditional generic formulas. A generic analysis often benefits from a wider-reaching contextual approach, as a substantial number of genre films (especially science-fiction, fantasy, and westerns, but also others such as journey films, war films, and historical dramas) incorporate intentional metaphors and symptomatic content relating to contemporary society at the time they were made.

Another way to examine a film in a certain context is to chronicle its **reception** by audiences and critics over the years, possibly in conjunction with one or more of the other approaches noted above. Some films were huge popular and critical successes when originally released, but were all but forgotten within a few years or perhaps a decade or two. Other films were virtually ignored when they first came out, but gradually gained viewer and critical acclaim to the point that they're now considered major masterpieces or beloved favorites. It's possible that a film originally rejected by critics but popular with the mass viewing public gradually reversed that position over the decades so that it is now critically respected but largely disliked by the general public. Still other films provoke a certain amount of controversy, falling in and out of favor from one decade to another as public and/or critical tastes change. Historic events and/or general changes in cultural trends and popular attitudes over time may be related to such changes in a film's status. A variation on this survey of response to a film over the years is the **genetic** approach, which follows a film through all stages of its creation and release. It will examine and evaluate various drafts of the story and script, memos about changes during production, continuing through various cuts of the film made for preview audiences, theatrical release, re-edited rereleases, television and video editions, and later "definitive" director's cuts. Such an analysis may provide valuable insight into the artistic process and/or its relationship to commercial considerations as well as implications about tastes, values, and sophistication of target audiences.

A viewer can use any one or combination of these critical approaches to try to figure out just what a filmmaker is trying to say in a work. Different approaches may embrace or totally ignore other approaches to come up with similar or completely opposite ideas about what a film really means. There may be as many different interpretations of a film as there are critics, but examining a film from a variety of approaches may reveal things one never even considered while watching it for the first time. Of course, trying to use every approach to analyze a film would result in a book-length study. Any particular film may lend itself most easily to one or two specific approaches in detail, with some consideration of perhaps one or more other approaches. Writing a brief critical analysis, whether three pages, five pages, or 25 pages, requires narrowing down the scope of your coverage to only what strikes you as most important about the film and what you consider most rewarding to discuss.

APPROACHES TO CRITICISM

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Genre and Paraphrasable content — type of work and synopsis
Textual-Linguistic — authenticity of text; variations of different editions
Historical-Biographical — effect of historical environment and creator's own life on the work
Moral-Philosophical —ideas explored or set forth by author (Content)

FORMALISTIC APPROACH
Structure, arrangement, and their effect through technique = "achieved content"
Content with Technique results in Form, or "Art"

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH
Freud: Id - Ego - Superego
        --Sexuality, symbolism
Jung: "Collective Unconscious"

MYTHOLOGICAL-ARCHETYPAL APPROACH
Recurring Literary Images and Motifs or Patterns: Archetypes
Creation Archetype
Immortality Archetype
        -Escape from Time — "Return to Paradise"
        -Submersion into Endless Cycle of Time — Death and Regeneration
Hero Archetype
        -Quest Motif — Long journey, with numerous tasks and obstacles
        -Initiation — separation - transformation - return
        -Sacrificial Scapegoat — Death of the Hero for the welfare of others

EXPONENTIAL APPROACH
"Symbolistic" Approach — Symbols, Imagery, Patterns, Motifs

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH
Projection of the movement of social history

LINGUISTIC APPROACH
Precise meanings of words and passages

APPRECIATIVE APPROACH
Personal reactions and impressions

GENERIC APPROACH
The work as an example of a genre, how it compares with others of its type, using common themes and motifs in similar or different ways

GENETIC APPROACH
Growth and development of a work from its genesis, through revisions and editions (before and/or after intitial release to the public)

SOME SPECIFIC POINTS FOR ANALYSIS

A short paper cannot cover everything, especially a one-page movie review or a quick blog posting.
(One typed page of 500-700 words is equivalent to an average newspaper movie review. Two to three typed pages would be comparable the length of many magazine movie reviews.) Only one aspect can be examined in some depth, or several important aspects might be touched upon briefly. Reconsideration of the elements of a film that you noticed the most, or caused you to think about them afterwards, would be a good point to begin when choosing a topic for either a quick reaction or any analytical paper.

Writing (Script)
Plot and Story (consider the differentiation between the two)
  Subject material
  Treatment or attitude
  Believability
  Logical development
  Unity
  Closure
  Overall structure (possibly compare with film editing)
Characters
  Individual characterization (not to be confused with actor's performance)
  Action and interaction
  Believability
Setting
  Realistic, surrealistic, impressionistic, expressionistic?
  Authenticity
  Importance to story
Social and/or Philosophical significance
  "Message," if any
  Author's statement(s) or commentaries on subject material, characters, events
  Relationships and possible parallels with real life situations
Symbolism
  Types of symbols (and techniques that achieve them)
  Meanings
  Obscure, subtle, or blatant? Overly obscure? Overly blatant?
  Effectiveness

Acting
Believability in character (casting), actor persona vs. directorial control
Consistency or evenness in performance and style (individual actors and within ensemble)
Interpretation of author's intention (including actor choices and directorial choices)

Directing
Control of overall production, coaching of actors' performances
Mise en scene
  —realism or stylization or a blend of the two?
  —appropriateness to subject —relationship to original scripted descriptions
Staging of action —realistic? —effectiveness
Filmmaking techniques utilized, their appropriateness and effectiveness
Style: Was the director primarily responsible (an *auteur*)
  or merely a coordinator of the cast and other technicians?

Photography (Cinematography)

Composition – how does it emphasize character or plot elements?
    Arrangement of images in the frame, camera position — actors, setting, props
    Making use of the aspect ratio
Lighting – how does it contribute to the mood?
Camera techniques and movements
Visual motifs
Color or Black and White — use and effectiveness
Film vs. Digital image acquisition and post-production image manipulation

Editing

Continuity vs. intentional discontinuity
Pacing
Average shot lengths and variations in shot lengths
Types of transitions between shots and scenes (visual and audio)
Control and manipulation of time (e.g. montage, jump cuts, re-ordering of story chronology, etc.)
Use of sound in conjunction with the image

Sound

Independence from or coordination with image
Effectiveness: augmenting, reinforcing, or merely repeating visual information
Blending and layering of dialogue, sound effects, music
Diegetic vs. non-diegetic
Synchronous vs. asynchronous (e.g., audio flashbacks or flashforwards?)
Audio motifs