

VIBES FROM THE SCREEN

Chapter 1

Why People Watch Movies

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Many people watch a movie purely for light entertainment. Others may hope to get something deeper out of the film, but lack the understanding and tools to see and absorb the art in front of them. Watching a film can be enhanced by viewing it with an informed awareness and some understanding of the elements of the craft of filmmaking. To gain the fullest appreciation, each film viewer should be receptive to the full experience mentally and emotionally. To view a film critically and elevate your viewing experience means to experience cinema with greater thought and awareness of your physical and emotional reactions.

I have discovered that the more one knows about filmmaking, the more one enjoys the art and begins to appreciate all of the effort put into the final cut. As you become more aware of the meaning(s) contained in a film, it will help you identify the common ground between you and the film.

People primarily watch movies for the experiences they provide:

1. They want a break from the daily grind and to be placed in a different situation. Some want the plain escape to a mindless entertainment; others want emotional and mental stimulation.
2. A movie allows you to experience something that you cannot in your real life: for example, a way to fight back, a romance with a gorgeous partner, an adventure or trip, or being there in history.
3. For those two hours what is on screen seems real, and, as we absorb it, the art leads us to laugh, cry, learn, get scared, love, become aware, discover, be outraged, get confused, be disgusted, be touched, get sad, be distracted, be inspired, and many other Film viewers undergo what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief." They accept what is on the screen on its own terms, giving themselves over for a brief time to the face value of the director's depiction.

In describing how he approached thrillers, director Alfred Hitchcock believed that the less the hero of the play is emphasized, identified, and characterized, the more viewers will endow him/her with their own internal meaning and the more the viewer will identify with the character. In other words, by the filmmaker not placing an emphasis on any particular characteristic, the viewers are assured that they are like the hero.

We can all agree that movies allow us to escape, but it's often more than simple escapism. Movies can take us to places we've never been and inside the skins of people quite different from ourselves. They offer us a window into the wider world, broadening our perspectives and opening our eyes to new wonders. At the same time, a person can also choose not to watch some films for any number of reasons. It might be the genre, or a particular actor's presence, or a bias against the subject matter. Some people do not want to see particular movies because they can't or won't deal

with the emotional reaction they fear may occur. Maybe the topic is too close to home, or they fear that the depicted events will happen to them. Many people over forty-five did not want to see *Still Alice* (2014) because it dealt with the early onset of Alzheimer's disease. The possibility of eventually developing the disease was too much for that age group.

Movies help people fill some of their needs. The needs are individual in nature, and how the need is satisfied is individualistic. Some examples:

- ◆ Movies are a way to acquire knowledge, information, and ideas.
- ◆ Movies feed into the moods of the viewers. Often they may provide a vehicle for release. Other times, they push an emotional button that has been suppressed. Have you ever watched a movie and then felt guilty because you had not done something in your life? Some films are feel-good movies, but others are sad, heavy movies.
- ◆ In a similar vein, sometimes we discover the capacity for pleasure from taboo activities in scenes we would never admit to in any other environment or time.
- ◆ People use media to reassure their status, gain credibility, and stabilize. "Compared to that family, I am really okay."
- ◆ Watching a movie with family or friends adds to your enjoyment. If your friends are going to the movies you may also go to be part of the group. Watching a movie on your own will probably let you pay more attention to the art of the film, but will leave you without the social venue necessary to think it all through afterward.

As British film professor Patrick Phillips has pointed out, we exit a movie wanting to talk and share impressions, sort out our reactions, and debate the film's issues and what it all meant. This is an integral part of our cinema visits.

C.S. Lewis, writing in *An Experiment in Criticism*, summarized our film-going purpose by stating that we "seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own."¹

Films use techniques, individually or combined, to convey both story and meaning. In their book *An Introduction to Film Analysis*, Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos say that: "Whenever filmmakers lay out a set, direct actors to act in a certain way, place the camera in particular

¹ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 137–138.

positions, and assemble the resulting mass of shots into a coherent narrative, they not only tell a story, they also make meaning."²

Even though the average moviegoer has viewed hundreds of films, the fundamental elements are not something they know much about. The goal of this book is to provide the reader with:

1. an introductory understanding of basic film elements;
2. a guide on how those elements are used to convey a message in the film; and
3. an understanding of how to discern any film's meaning.

It is my hope movie viewers will not only be more entertained, but by becoming more aware of the nuances and processes affecting their viewing pleasure, they will be aesthetically stimulated and mentally challenged at the appropriate times. From those reactions will come an enhanced appreciation of the art.

Learning how to put this book's lessons to work will take time and effort on your part. My film-group members tell me that they initially became so involved in looking at the various elements of a film that they sometimes missed the overall experience. That is an unfortunate part of the learning curve that can be overcome. Many tell me they initially have to watch the movie at least twice to get both the entertainment value and enjoy the art. Unlike reading a book, where we can go back and reread a page or a chapter, a movie is running before your eyes at a certain number of frames per second. Unless you are watching a DVD that you can start and stop, movie viewing requires you to take it all in on the fly. This is why I urge people to give themselves time to fully process all that they have experienced at the viewing.

Slowly, my group participants become able to assimilate the two experiences into a single viewing. That being said, however, I always recommend watching a new movie several times. I have enjoyed some movies so much that I have watched them six or seven times over a number of years. Each viewing revealed something new and provided me a greater appreciation of the film and its art.

With the idea of keeping my study group members open to the full experience of a movie I have an important rule they must follow: NEVER read reviews before seeing a movie. Do not let yourself be influenced ahead of time either by the critics' various views of the story line or their interpretations. To openly receive any movie, you must go in with no expectations. If you need something more than the description to decide whether or not to see a film, use the average ratings a film receives from a number of professional critics, which can be found on *Metacritic* or *Rotten Tomatoes* to guide you, but nothing else. Once you have seen the film then be sure to read some of the reviews and analyses to assist you in getting the fullest experience and understanding.

²Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis* (New York: Continuum Int'l Publishing Group, Inc., 2012), 1.

In order to appreciate the art of a film, it is necessary to open yourself up to receiving the physical, mental and emotional vibes that emanate from the sounds, images, and action on the screen. This is something that can be cultivated, but it also requires frequent and varied film viewings and discussions. One frequent obstacle to becoming open is the viewer's past. Our personal experiences, education, and environments leave us all with an array of slanted opinions or biases. Learn to be flexible and how to judge the art objectively, which is not an easy task. One way to do this is to see as many different types and genres of film as possible.

It is important not to let your initial reaction control your ultimate understanding. Give yourself time to fully digest the combination of images and dialogue in any given movie before activating your own intellectualization, perceptions, and interpretations. This may take a few hours or a few days and, as said earlier, perhaps a second viewing.

Once you have read this book, there are some exercises you can do to help yourself become receptive to the fullest experience. They can be found in the Conclusion. In order to increase your appreciation of the art, you have to hone your attention, memory, and perception skills, which requires looking and listening closer than you may be used to doing.

"I took only one film course in my life... It was a course in film analysis, where [the teacher] would ask students to watch films and to concentrate on one specific element at a time: picture, sound, music, acting....Afterwards, everyone in the class would compare notes, and the things we discovered were pretty amazing. It was a fascinating course."

-David Lynch, director and screenwriter