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THE CONCEPT OF FORM IN FILM

If you are listening closely to a song on a tape and the tape is abruptly switched off, you are likely to feel frustrated. If you start reading a novel, become engrossed in it, and then misplace the book, you will probably feel the same way.

Such feelings arise because our experience of artworks is patterned and structured. The human mind craves form. For this reason, form is of central importance in any artwork, regardless of its medium. The entire study of the nature of artistic form is the province of the aesthetician, and it is too large a question for us to deal with extensively here. (See the first part of the Notes and Queries to this chapter for pertinent readings.) But some ideas about aesthetic form are indispensable in analyzing films.

FORM AS SYSTEM

Artistic form is best thought of in relation to a perceiver, the human being who watches the play, reads the novel, listens to the piece of music, or views the film. Perception in all phases of life is an activity. As you walk down the street, you scan your surroundings for salient aspects - a friend's face, a familiar landmark, a sign of rain. The mind is never at rest. It is constantly seeking order and significance, testing the world for breaks in the habitual pattern.

Artworks rely on this dynamic, unifying quality of the human mind. They provide organized occasions in which we exercise and develop our ability to pay attention, to anticipate upcoming events, to draw conclusions, and to construct a whole out of parts. Every novel leaves something to the imagination; every song asks us to expect a certain melody; every film coaxes us to connect sequences into a larger whole. But how does this process work? How does an inert object, the poem on a piece of paper or the sculpture in the park, draw us into such activities?

Some answers to this question are clearly inadequate. Our activity cannot be *in* the artwork itself. A poem is only words on paper; a song, just acoustic vibrations; a film, merely patterns of light and dark on a screen. Objects do nothing. Evidently, then, the artwork and the perceiver depend on one another.

The best answer to our question would seem to be that the artwork cues us to perform a specific activity. Without the artwork's prompting, we could not start or maintain the process. Without our playing along and picking up the cues, the artwork remains only an artifact. A painting uses color, line, and other techniques to invite us to imagine the space portrayed, to recall the moment before the one depicted or to anticipate the next one, to compare color and texture, to run our eye over the composition in a certain direction. A poem's words may guide us to imagine a scene, or to notice a break in rhythm, or to expect a rhyme. A sculpture's shape, volume, and materials prompt us to move around it, noticing how its mass fills the space it occupies. In general, any work of art presents cues that can elicit a particular activity from the perceiver.

We can go further in describing how an artwork cues us to perform activities. These cues are not simply random; they are organized into *systems*. Let us take a system as any set of elements that depend on and affect one another. The human body is one such system; if one component, the heart, ceases to function, all of the other parts will be in danger. Within the body there are individual, smaller systems, such as the nervous system or the optical system. A single small malfunction in a car's workings may bring the whole machine to a standstill; the other parts may not need repair, but the whole system depends on the operation of each part. More abstract sets of relationships also constitute systems, such as a body of laws governing a country, or the ecological balance of the wildlife in a lake.

As with each of these instances, a film is not simply a random batch of elements. Like all artworks, a film has **form.** By film form, in its broadest sense, we mean the total system that the viewer perceives in the film. Form is the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film. In this part of the book and in Part III (on film style), we shall be surveying the sorts of elements a film may possess. Since the viewer makes sense of the film by recognizing these elements and reacting, to them in various ways, we shall also be considering how form and Style involve the spectator's activity.

This description of form is still very abstract, so let us draw some examples from one film that many people have seen. In *The Wizard of Oz* the perceiver can notice many particular elements. There is, most obviously, a set of *narrative* elements. These comprise the film's story. Dorothy dreams

that a tornado blows her to Oz, where she encounters certain characters. The narrative continues to the point when Dorothy awakens from her dream to find herself home in Kansas. We can also perceive a set of *stylistic elements: the way the camera moves, the patterns of color in the frame, the use of music, and other devices. Stylistic elements derive from the various film techniques we will be considering in later chapters.*

Because *The Wizard of Oz is* a system and not just a hodgepodge,the perceiver actively relates the elements within each set to one another. We link and compare narrative elements. We see the tornado as causing Dorothy's trip to Oz; we identify the characters in Oz as similar to characters in Dorothy's Kansas life. The stylistic elements can also be connected. For instance, we recognize the "We're Off to See the Wizard" tune whenever Dorothy picks up a new companion. We attribute unity to the film by positing two subsystems - a narrative one and a stylistic one within the larger system of the total film.

Moreover, our minds seek to tie these subsystems to one another. In *The Wizard of Oz,* the narrative subsystem can be linked to the stylistic subsystem. Film colors identify prominent landmarks, such as Kansas (in black and white) and the Yellow Brick Road. Movements of the camera call our attention to story action. And the music serves to describe certain characters and actions. It is the overall pattern of relationships among the various subsystems of elements that makes Lip the form of *The Wizard of Oz.*

"FORM VERSUS CONTENT"

Very often people assume that "form" as a concept is the opposite of something called "content." This assumption implies that a poem or a musical piece or a film is like a jug. An external shape, the jug, *contains something that could just as easily be held in a cup or a pail. Under this assumption, form becomes less important than whatever it is presumed to contain.*

We do not accept this assumption. If form is the total system which the viewer attributes to the film, there is no inside or outside. Every component *functions as part of* the overall pattern that is perceived. Thus we shall treat as formal elements many things that some people consider content. From our standpoint, subject matter and abstract ideas all enter into the total system of the artwork. They may cue us to frame certain expectations or draw certain inferences. The perceiver relates such elements to one another and makes them interact dynamically. Consequently, subject matter and ideas become somewhat different from what they might be outside the work.

For example, consider a historical subject, such as the United States Civil War. The real Civil War may be studied, its causes and consequences disputed. But in a film such as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation,* the Civil War is not neutral "content." It enters into relationships with other elements: a story about two families, political ideas about Reconstruction, and the epic film style of the battle scenes. The form of Griffith's film includes elements depicting the Civil War in a way that is coordinated with

other elements in the film. A different film by another filmmaker might draw on the same subject matter, the Civil War, but there the subject would play a different role in a different formal system. In *Gone with the Wind* the Civil War functions as a backdrop for the heroine's romance, but in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* the war aids three cynical men in their search for gold. Thus subject matter is shaped by the film's formal context and our perceptions of it.

FORMAL EXPECTATIONS

We are now in a better position to see how film form guides the audience's activity. An interrupted song or an uncompleted story brings frustration because of our urge for form. We realize that the system of relationships within the work has not yet been completed. Something more is needed to make the form whole and satisfying. We have been caught up in the interrelations among elements and want to understand how the cues prompt us to develop and complete the patterns.

One way in which form affects our experience, then, is to create the sense that "everything is there." Why is IL satisfying when a character glimpsed early in a film reappears an hour later or when a shape in the frame is balanced by another shape? Because such relations among parts suggest that the film has its own organizing laws or rules-its own system.

Moreover, an artwork's form creates a special soil of involvement on the part of the spectator. In everyday life, we perceive things around us in a practical way. But in a film the things that happen on the screen serve no such practical end for us. We can see them differently. In life if a person fell down on the street, we would probably hurry to help the person up. But in a film when Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplinfalls, we laugh. We shall see in Chapter 6 how even as basic an act of filmmaking as training a shot creates a new way of seeing. We watch a pattern which is no longer just .,out there" in the everyday world, but which has become a calculated part within a self-contained whole. Film form can even make us perceive things anew, shaking us out of our accustomed habits and suggesting fresh ways of hearing, seeing, feeling, and thinking.

To get a sense of the ways in which purely formal features can involve the audience, try the following experiment (suggested by Barbara Herrnstein Smith). Assume that "A' is the first letter of a series. What follows?

1. AB

   "A" was a cue, and on this basis you made a formal hypothesis. probably that the letters would run in alphabetical oi-der. Your expectation was confirmed. What follows AB? Most people say "C." But from does not always follow oui- initial expectation.

2. ABA

   Here form takes us by surprise, puzzles us. If we are puzzled by a formal development, we readjust our expectations and try again. What follows ABA?

3. ABAC

   Here the possibilities were chiefly two: ABAB or ABAC **.** (Note that your expectations *limit* possibilities as well as select them.) If you

expected **ABAC,** your expectation was gratified and you can confidently predict the next letter. If you expected ABAB, you still should be able to make a strong hypothesis about the next letter.

4. ABACA

Simple as this game is, it illustrates the involving power of form. You as a viewer or listener don't simply let the parts parade past you. You enter into an active participation with them, creating and readjusting expectations about form as the experience develops.

Now consider a story in a film. *The Wizard of* Oz begins with Dorothy clutching her dog, Toto, and running down a road. Immediately, we form expectations: Perhaps she will meet another character or arrive at her destination. Even such a simple action asks that the audience participate actively in the ongoing process by making certain hypotheses about "what will happen next" and readjusting expectations accordingly.

Expectation pervades our experience of art. In reading a mystery story, we expect that a solution will be offered at some point, usually the end. In listening to a piece of music, we expect repetition of a melody or a motif. (Many musical pieces, in fact, follow the AB, ABA, and ABACA patterns we have just outlined.) In looking at a painting, we search for what we expect to be the most significant features, then scan the less prominent portions. From beginning to end, our involvement with a work of art depends largely on expectations.

This does not mean that the expectations must be immediately satisfied. The satisfaction of our expectations may be *delayed*. In our alphabet exercise, instead of presenting ABA we might have presented this:

AB . . . .

The series of periods postpones the revelation of the next letter, and you must wait to find it out. What we normally call *suspense* involves a delay in fulfilling an established expectation. As the term implies, suspense leaves something "suspended"-not only the next element in a pattern but also our urge for completion.

Expectations may also be cheated, as when we expect ABC but get ABA. In general, *surprise* is a result of an expectation that is revealed to be incorrect. We do not expect that a gangster in 1930s Chicago will find a rocket ship in his garage; if he does, our reaction may require us to readjust our assumptions about what can happen in this story. (The example suggests that comedy often depends on cheating expectations.)

One more path of our expectations needs tracing. Sometimes an artwork will cue us to hazard guesses about what has come *before* this point in the work. When Dorothy runs down the road at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz,* we wonder not only where she is going but where she has been and what she is fleeing from. Similarly, a painting or photograph may depict a scene that asks the viewer to speculate on some earlier event. Let us call this ability of the spectator to frame hypotheses about prior events curiosity. As Chapter 3 will show, curiosity is an important factor in narrative form.

Already we have several possible ways in which the artwork can actively engage us. Artistic form may cue us to make expectations and then gratify them, either quickly or eventually. Or form may work to disturb our expectations. We often associate art with peace and serenity, but many

artworks offer us conflict, tension, and shock. An artwork's form may even strike us as unpleasant because of its imbalances or contradictions. Many people find atonal music, abstract or surrealist painting, and experimental writing **highly** disturbing. Similarly, there are many important directors whose films jar rather than soothe us. As we shall see in examining the editing of Eisenstein's *October* (Chapter 7) or the ambiguous narrative in Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (Chapter 10), a film may rely on contradictions and gaps. The point is not to condemn or wish away such films but to understand that in disturbing us, such films still arouse *formal expectations*.

Indeed, if we can adjust our expectations to a disturbing work, we may even become more deeply involved in our viewing of it than we would be with a work that gratifies our expectations easily. Such disturbing artworks may display new kinds of form to which we are not accustomed. Our initial disturbance may diminish as we grasp the work's unique formal system. Or some of these disturbing works may be less coherent than more traditional ones, but they reward analysis partly because they reveal to us our normal, implicit expectations about form. There are no limits to the number of possible formal arrangements which films can create, and our enjoyment of the cinema as a whole can only increase if we are prepared to explore the less familiar kinds of cues which challenging films offer us.

CONVENTIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Our ABAC example illustrates still another point. One guide to your hunches was *prior experience*. Your knowledge of the English alphabet makes ABA an unlikely alternative. This fact suggests that aesthetic form is not a pure activity isolated from other experiences. The idea that our perception of form depends on prior experience has important implications for both artist and spectator

Precisely because artworks are human artifacts and because the artist lives in history and society, he or she cannot avoid relating the work, in some way, to other works and to aspects of the world in general. A tradition, a dominant style, a popular form - sorne such elements will be common to several different artworks. Such common traits are usually called *conventions*. For example, it is a convention of the musical film genre that characters sing and dance, as in *The Wizard of Oz*. It is one convention of narrative form that the narrative solves the problems which the characters confront, and *Wizard* likewise accepts this convention by letting Dorothy return to Kansas. Bodies of conventions constitute *norms* of what is appropriate or expected in a particular tradition. Through obeying or violating norms, artists relate their works to other works.

From the spectator's standpoint, the perception of artistic form will arise from cues within the work and from prior experiences. But although our *ability* to recognize formal cues may be innate, the *particular* habits and expectations we bring to the artwork will be guided by other experiences - experiences derived from everyday life and from other artworks. You were able to play the ABAC game because you had learned the alphabet. You may have learned it in everyday life (in a classroom, from your parents) or from an artwork (as some children now learn the alphabet

from television cartoons). Similarly, we are able to recognize the "Journey" pattern in *The Wizard of Oz* because we have taken trips and because we have seen other films organized around this pattern (e.g., *Stagecoach* or *North by Northwest),* and because the pattern is to be found in other artworks, such as the *Odyssey* or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Our ability to spot cues, to see them as forming systems, and to create expectations is guided by our real-life experiences and our knowledge of formal conventions.

In recognizing film form, then, the audience must be prepared to understand formal cues through knowledge of life and of other artworks. But what If the two principles come into conflict? In ordinary life people don't simply start to sing and dance, as they do in *The Wizard of* Oz*. Very often conventions demarcate art from life, saying implicitly, "In artworks of this sort the laws of everyday reality don't operate. By the rules of this game, something 'unreal' *can* happen." All stylized art, from opera, ballet, and pantomime to comedy and other genres, depends on the audience's willingness to suspend the laws of ordinary experience and to accept particular conventions. It is simply beside the point to insist that such conventions are unreal or to ask why Tristan sings to Isolde or why Buster Keaton doesn't smile. Very often the most relevant prior experience for perceiving form is not everyday experience but previous encounters with works having similar conventions.

Genres, or *types* of artworks, offer many examples of widely accepted conventional usage. If we expect a mystery story to eventually reveal the murderer, this is not because of life experience many real-life crimes go unsolved-but because one "rule" of the mystery genre is that the puzzle will be solved at the end. Similarly, *The Wizard of Oz is* a musical, and this genre utilizes the convention that characters will sing and dance. Like other art media, film often asks us to adjust our expectations to the conventions which a particular genre uses.

Finally, artworks can create new conventions. A highly innovative work can at first seem odd because it refuses to conform to the norms we expect. Cubist painting, twelve-tone music, and the French "New Novel" of the 1950s seemed difficult initially because of their refusal to adhere to conventions. But a closer look may show that unusual artwork has its own rules, creating an unorthodox formal system, which we can learn to recognize and respond to. Eventually, the new systems offered by such unusual works may themselves furnish conventions and thus create new expectations.

FORM AND FEELING

Certainly emotion plays a large role in our experience of form. To understand this role, let us distinguish between emotions *represented* 1 . *n* the artwork and an emotional *response felt by* the spectator. If an actor grimaces in agony, the emotion of pain is *represented within the film*. If, on the other hand, the viewer who sees the painful expression laughs (as the viewer of a comedy might), the emotion of amusement *is felt by the spectator*. Both types of emotion have formal implications.

Emotions represented within the film interact as parts of the film's total system. For example, that grimace of pain might be consistent with the

contortions of the comedian's body. A character's sly expression may prepare us for the later revelation of his or her villainous side. Or a cheerful scene might stand in contrast to a mournful one. A tragic event might be undercut by humorous editing or music. All emotions present in a film may be seen as systematically related to one another through that film's form.

The spectator's emotional response to the film is related to form as well. We have just seen how cues in the artwork interact with our prior experience, especially our experience of artistic conventions. Often form in artworks appeals to ready-made reactions to certain images (for example, sexuality, race, social class). But form can create new responses instead of harping on old ones. Just as formal conventions often lead us to suspend our normal sense of real-life experience, so form may lead us to override our everyday emotional responses. People whom we would despise in life may become spellbinding as characters in a film. We can watch a film about a subject that normally repels us and find it fascinating. One cause of these experiences lies in the systematic way we become involved in form. In *The Wizard of Oz* we might, for example, find the land of Oz far more attractive than Kansas. But because the film's form leads us to sympathize with Dorothy in her desire to go home, we feel great satisfaction when she finally returns to Kansas.

It is first and foremost the dynamic aspect of form that engages our feelings. Expectation, for instance, spurs emotion. To make an expectation about "what happens next" is to invest some emotion in the situation. Delayed fulfillment of an expectation-suspense may produce anxiety or sympathy. (Will the detective find the criminal? Will boy get girl? Will the melody return?) Gratified expectations may produce a feeling of satisfaction or relief. (The mystery is solved, boy does get girl, the melody returns one more time.) Cheated expectations and curiosity about past material may produce puzzlement or keener interest. (So he isn't the detective? This isn't a romance story? Has a second melody replaced the first one?)

Note that all of these possibilities *may* occur. There is no general recipe by which a novel or film can be concocted to produce the "correct" emotional response. It is all a matter of context-that is, of the particular system that is each artwork's overall form. All we can say for certain is that the emotion felt by the spectator will emerge from the totality of formal relationships she or he perceives in the work. This is one reason why we should try to perceive as many formal relations as possible in a film; the richer our perception, the more exact and complex our response may become.

Taken in context, the relations between the feelings represented in the film and those felt by the spectator can be quite complex. Let us take an example. Many people believe that no more sorrowful event can occur than the death of a child. In most films this event would be represented so as to summon up the sadness we would also feel in life. But the power of artistic form can alter the emotional tenor of even this event. In Jean Renoir's *The Crime of' M. Lange* the cynical publisher Batala rapes and abandons Estelle, a young laundress. After Batala disappears, Estelle becomes integrated into the courtyard community and returns to her former fiancé. But Estelle is pregnant by Batala and bears his child. The scene when Estelle's employer, Valentine, announces that the child was born dead is one of the most

emotionally complex in cinema. The first emotions represented are solemnity and sorrow: the characters display grief. Suddenly Batala's cousin remarks, "Too bad. It was a relative." In the film's context this is taken as a joke, and the other characters break out in smiles and laughter. The shift in the emotion represented in the film catches us off guard. Since these characters are not heartless, we must readjust our reaction to the death and respond as they do - with relief. That Estelle has survived is far more important than the death of Batala's child. The film's formal development has rendered appropriate a reaction that might be perverse in ordinary life. This is a daring, extreme example, but it dramatically illustrates how both emotions onscreen and our responses depend on the context created by form.

FORM AND MEANING

Like emotion, meaning is important to our experience of artworks. As an active perceiver, the spectator is constantly testing the work for larger significance, for what it says or suggests. The sorts of meanings that the spectator attributes to the work may vary considerably. Let us look at four assertions about the meaning of *The Wizard of Oz*.

1. *In the Depression, a cyclone takes a a girl from her family's Kansas farm to the mythical land of Oz. After a series of adventures, she returns home.*

This is very concrete, close to a bare-bones plot summary. Here the significance depends on the spectator's ability to identify specific items: a period of American history called the Depression, a place known as Kansas, features of Midwestern climate. A viewer who was unacquainted with such information would miss some of the meanings cued by the film. We can call such tangible meanings *referential,* since the film refers to things or places already invested with significance.

A film's subject matter-in *The Wizard of Oz,* American Midwestern farm life in the 1930s-is often established through referential meaning. And, as one would expect, referential meaning functions within the film's overall form, in the way that we have argued that the subject of the Civil War functions within *The Birth of a Nation*. Suppose that instead of having Dorothy live in flat, spare, rural Kansas, the film made Dorothy a child living in Beverly Hills. When she got to Oz (transported there, perhaps, by a hillside flash flood), the contrast between the crowded opulence of Oz and her home would not be nearly so sharp. Here the referential meanings of "Kansas" play a definite role in the overall contrast of settings that the film's form creates.

2. *A girl dreams of leaving home to escape her troubles. Only after she leaves does she realize how much her home means to her.*

This assertion is still fairly concrete in the meaning it attributes to the film. If someone were to ask you the "point" of the film-what it seems to be trying to "get across"-you might answer with something like this. Perhaps You would also mention Dorothy's closing line, "There's no place like home,"

as a summary of what she learns. Let us call this sort of openly asserted meaning an *explicit meaning*.

Like referential meanings, explicit meanings function within the film',', overall form. They are defined by context. For instance, we are inclined to take "There's no place like home" as a statement of the meaning of the entire film. But, first, *why* do we feel that as a strongly meaningful line? In ordinary conversation it is a cliché. In context, however, the line is uttered in close-up, it comes at the end of the film (a formally privileged moment), and it refers back to all of Dorothy's desires and ordeals, recalling the film's narrative development toward the achievement of her goal. It is the *form* of the film that gives the familiar saying an unfamiliar weight.

This example suggests that we must examine how explicit meanings *in* a film interact with other elements of the overall system. If "There's no place like home" adequately and exhaustively summarizes the meaning of *The* Wizard *of Oz*, no one need ever see the film; the summary would suffice. But like feelings, meanings are formal entities. They play a part along with other elements to make up the total system. We usually cannot isolate a particularly significant moment and declare it to be *the* meaning *of the whole film. Even Dorothy's "There's no place like home," however strong as a summary of one* meaningful element in *The Wizard of Oz*, must be placed in the context of the film's entire beguiling Oz fantasy. If "There's no place like home" were the whole point of the film, why is there so much that is pleasant in Oz? The explicit meanings of a film arise from the *whole* film and are set in dynamic formal relation to one another.

In trying to see the meaningful moments of a film as parts of a larger whole, it is useful to set individually significant moments against one another. Thus Dorothy's final line could be juxtaposed to the scene of the characters getting spruced up after their arrival at the Emerald City. We can try to see the film as not "about" one or the other but rather about the relation of the two-the risk and delight of a fantasy world versus the comfort and stability of home. Thus the film's total system will be larger than any one explicit meaning we can find in it. Instead of asking "What is this film's meaning?" we can ask, "How do all the film's meanings interrelate formally?"

3. An adolescent who must soon face the adult world yearns for a return to the simple world of childhood, but she eventually accepts the demands of adulthood.

This is considerably more abstract than the first two statements. It assumes something that goes beyond what is explicitly stated in the film: that *The Wizard of Oz* is in some sense "about" the passage from childhood to adulthood. On this view, the film suggests or *implies* that, in adolescence, people may desire to return to the apparently uncomplicated world of childhood. Dorothy's frustration with her aunt and uncle and her urge to flee to a place "over the rainbow" become examples of a general conception of adolescence. Let us call this suggested meaning an implicit one. When perceivers ascribe implicit meanings to an artwork, they are usually said to be *interpreting* it.

Clearly, interpretations vary. One viewer might propose that *The Wizard of Oz* is really about adolescence. Another might suggest that it is really about courage and persistence, or that it is a satire on the adult world. One of the appeals of artworks is that they seem to ask us to interpret them, often in several ways at once. Again, the artwork cues the spectator to perform certain activities - here, building up implicit meanings. But once again the artwork's overall form shapes the viewer's sense of implicit meanings.

Some viewers approach a film expecting to learn valuable lessons about life. They may admire a film because it conveys a profound or relevant message. Important as meaning is, though, this attitude often errs by splitting the film into the content portion (the meaning) and the form (the vehicle for the content). The abstract quality of implicit meanings can lead to very broad concepts (often called *themes).* A film may have as its theme courage or the power of faithful love. Such descriptions have some value, but they are very general; hundreds of films fit them. To summarize *The Wizard of Oz* as being simply about the problems of adolescence does not do justice to the specific qualities of the film as an experience. We suggest that the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular and concrete* features of a film.

This is not to say that we should not interpret films. But we should strive to make our interpretations precise by seeing how each film's thematic meanings are suggested by the film's total system. In a film, both explicit and implicit meanings depend closely on the relations among the elements of narrative and style. In *The Wizard of Oz* the visual element called "the Yellow Brick Road" has no meaning in and of itself. But if we examine the function it fulfills in relation to the narrative, the music, the colors, and so on, we can argue that the Yellow Brick Road does indeed function meaningfully. Dorothy's strong desire to go home makes the Road represent that desire. We want Dorothy to be successful in getting to the end of the Road, as well as in getting back to Kansas; thus the Road participates in the theme of the desirability of home.

Interpretation need not be an end in itself. It also helps in understanding the overall form of the film. Nor does interpretation exhaust tile possibilities of a device. We can say many things about the Yellow Brick Road other than how its meaning relates to the film's thematic material. We could analyze how the Road becomes the stage for dances and songs along the way; we could see how it is narratively important because an indecision at a crossroads delays Dorothy long enough to meet the Scarecrow; we could work out a color scheme for the film, contrasting the yellow road, the red slippers, the green Emerald City, and so forth. F'rom this standpoint, interpretation may be seen as one kind of formal analysis, one that seeks to analyze a film's implicit meanings. Those meanings should be constantly tested by reimmersing them in the concrete texture of the whole film.

4. In a society where human worth is measured by money, home and family may seem to be the last refuge of human values. This belief is especially strong in times Of economic crisis, such as that in the United States in the 1930s.

Like the third statement, this is abstract and general. It situates the film within a trend of thought which is assumed to be characteristic of American society during the 1930s. The claim could apply equally well to many other films, as well as to many novels, plays, poems, paintings, advertisements, radio shows, political speeches, and a host of cultural products of the period.

But there is something else worth noticing about the statement. It treats an explicit meaning in *The Wizard of Oz* ("There's no place like home") as a manifestation of a wider set of values characteristic of a whole society. We could treat implicit meanings the same way. If we say the film implies something about adolescence as a crucial time of transition, we could suggest that this emphasis on adolescence as a special period of life Is also a recurrent concern of American society. In other words, it is possible to understand a film's explicit or Implicit meanings as bearing traces of a particular set of social values. We can cat[this sort of meaning *symptomatic* meaning, and the set of values that get revealed can be considered to be a social **ideology**.

The possibility of noticing symptomatic meanings reminds us that all meaning, whether referential, explicit, or implicit, is a social phenomenon. Many meanings of films are ultimately ideological; that is, they spring from systems of culturally specific beliefs about the world. Religious beliefs, political opinions, conceptions of race or, sex or social class, even our most unconsciously held, deep-seated notions of life-all these constitute our ideological frame of reference. Although we may live as if our beliefs were the only true and real explanations of how the world is, we need only compare our own Ideology with that of another group or culture or historical period to see how historically and socially shaped those views are. In other times or places, "Kansas" or "home" or "adolescence" do not carry the meanings they carry in twentieth-century America.

Thus films, like other artworks, can be examined for their symptomatic meanings. Again, however, the abstract and general quality of such meanings can lead us away from the concrete form of the film. As when analyzing implicit meanings, the viewer should strive to ground symptomatic meanings in the film's specific aspects. A film *enacts* ideological meanings through its particular and unique formal system. We shall see in Chapter 10 how the narrative and stylistic systems of *Meet Me in St. Louis, Tout va bien,* and *Raging Bull* can be analyzed for ideological implications.

In short, films "have" meaning only because we attribute meanings to them. We cannot therefore regard meaning as a simple product to be extracted from the film. Our minds will probe an artwork for significance at several levels, seeking referential meanings, explicit meanings, implicit meanings, and symptomatic meanings. The more abstract and general our attributions of meaning, the more we risk loosening our grasp on the film's specific formal system. As analysts, we must balance our concern for that concrete system with our urge to assign it wider significance.

EVALUATION

In talking about an artwork, people often *evaluate* it, that is, they make claims about its goodness or badness. Reviews in popular magazines exist

almost solely to tell us whether a film is worth seeing; our friends- often urge us to go to their latest favorite. But all too often we discover that the film that someone else esteemed appears only mediocre to us. At that point we may bemoan the fact that most people evaluate films only on the basis of their own, often idiosyncratic, tastes.

How, then, are we to evaluate films with any degree of objectivity? We can start by realizing that there is a difference between personal taste and evaluative judgment. To say "I liked this film" or "I hated it" is not equal to saying "It's a good film" or "It's wretched." There are very few people in the world whose enjoyment is limited only to the greatest works. Most people can enjoy a film they know is not particularly good. This is perfectly reasonable unless they start trying to convince people that these pleasant films actually rank among the undying masterpieces. At that point others will probably stop listening to their judgments at all.

We may set aside, therefore, personal preference as the sole basis for judging a film's quality. Instead, the critic who wishes to make a relatively objective evaluation will use specific *criteria*. A criterion is a standard which can be applied in the judgment of many works. By using a criterion, the critic gains a basis for comparing films for relative quality.

There are many different criteria. Some people evaluate films on "realistic" criteria, judging a film good if it conforms to their view of reality. Aficionados of military history might judge a film entirely on whether the battle scenes use historically accurate weaponry; the narrative, editing, characterization, sound, and visual style might be of little interest to them. Other people condemn films because they don't find the action plausible; they will dismiss a scene by saying, "Who'd really believe that X would meet Y just at the right moment?" (We have already seen, though, that artworks often violate laws of reality and operate by their own conventions and internal rules.)

Viewers can also use moral criteria to evaluate films. Most narrowly, aspects of the film can be judged outside their context in the film's formal system. Some viewers might feel any film with nudity or profanity is bad, while other viewers might find just these aspects praiseworthy. More broadly, viewers and critics may employ moral criteria to evaluate a film's overall significance, and here the film's complete formal system becomes pertinent. A film might be judged good because of its overall view of life, its willingness to show opposed points of view, or its emotional range.

While "realistic" and moral criteria are well-suited to particular purposes, this book will suggest criteria that assess film's as artistic wholes. Such criteria should allow us to take each film's form into account as much as possible. *Coherence is* one such criterion. This quality, often conceived as unity, has traditionally been held to be a positive feature of artworks. So too has *intensity of effect*. If an artwork is vivid, striking, and emotionally engaging, it may be considered more valuable.

Another criterion is *complexity*. We can argue that, all other things being equal, complex films are good. A complex film engages our perception on many levels, creates a multiplicity of relations among many separate formal elements, and tends to create interesting formal patterns.

Yet another formal criterion is *originality*. Originality for its own sake is pointless, of course. Just because something is different does not mean

that it is good. But if an artist takes a familiar convention and uses it in a way that makes it fresh again or creates a new set of formal possibilities, then (all other things being equal) the resulting work may be considered good from an aesthetic standpoint.

Note that all these criteria are matters of degree. One film may be more complex than another, but the second film may be more complex than a third one. Moreover, there is often a give and take among the criteria. A film might be very complex but lack coherence or intensity. Ninety minutes of a black screen would make for an original film but not a very complex one. A "slasher" movie may create great intensity in certain scenes but be wholly unoriginal, as well as disorganized and simplistic. In applying the criteria, the analyst must often weigh one against another.

Evaluation can serve many useful ends. It can call attention to neglected artworks or make us rethink our attitudes toward accepted classics. But just as the discovery of meanings is not the only purpose of formal analysis, we suggest that evaluation is most fruitful when it is backed up by a close examination of the film. General statements ("This is a masterpiece") seldom enlighten us very much. Usually an evaluation is helpful insofar as it points to aspects of the film and shows us relations and qualities we have missed. Like interpretation, evaluation is most useful when it drives us back to the film itself as a formal system, helping us to understand that system better.

In reading this book, you will find that we have generally minimized evaluation. We think that most of the films and sequences we analyze are more or less good on the formal criteria we mentioned, but the purpose of this book is not to persuade you to accept a list of masterpieces. Rather, we believe that if we show in detail how films may be understood as artistic systems, you will have an informed basis for whatever evaluations you wish to make.

SUMMARY

If one issue has governed our treatment of aesthetic form, it might be said to be *concreteness*. Form is a specific system of patterned relationships that we perceive in an artwork. Such a concept helps us understand how even elements of what is normally considered "content"-subject matter, or abstract ideas-take on particular functions within any work.

Our experience of an artwork is also a concrete one. Picking up cues in the work, we can create specific expectations which are aroused, guided, delayed, cheated, satisfied, or disturbed. We undergo curiosity, suspense and surprise. We compare the particular aspects of the artwork with general conventions which we know from **life** and from art. The concrete context of the artwork expresses and stimulates emotions and enables us to construct many types of meanings. And even when we apply general criteria in evaluating artworks, we ought to use those criteria to help us discriminate more, to penetrate more deeply into the particular aspects of the artwork. The rest of this book is devoted to studying these properties of aesthetic form in cinema.

PRINCIPLES OF FILM FORM

Because film form is a system-that is, a unified set of related, interdependent elements-there must be some principles which help create the relationships among the parts. In disciplines other than the arts, principles may be sets of rules or laws. In the sciences principles may take the form of physical laws or mathematical propositions. In practical work, such principles provide firm guidelines about what is possible. For example, engineers designing an airplane must obey fundamental laws of aerodynamics.

In the arts, however, there are no absolute principles of form which all artists must follow. Artworks are products of culture. Thus many of the principles of artistic form are matters of convention. For example, films that follow one particular set of formal principles are widely recognized as the genre of "Westerns." The artist obeys (or disobeys) norm - bodies of conventions, not laws.

But within these social conventions, each artwork tends to set up its own specific formal principles. The forms of different films can vary enormously. We can distinguish, however, five general principles which the spectator perceives in a film's formal system: function, similarity and repetition, difference and variation, development, an(] unity/disunity.

FUNCTION

If form in cinema is the overall interrelation among various systems of elements, we can assume that every element in this totality has one or more **functions.** That is, every element will be seen as fulfilling one or more roles within the whole system.

Of any element within a film we can ask: What are its functions? In our example of *The Wizard of Oz,* every element in the film fulfills one or more roles. For instance, Miss Gulch, the woman who wants to take Toto from Dorothy, reappears in the Oz section as the Witch. In the opening portion of the film Miss Gulch causes Dorothy to run away from home. In Oz the Witch seeks to prevent Dorothy from returning home by keeping her away from the Emerald City and by trying to seize the ruby slippers. Even an element as apparently minor as the dog Toto serves many functions. The dispute over Toto causes Dorothy to run away from home and to get back too late to take shelter from the cyclone. Later, Toto's chasing of a cat makes Dorothy jump out of the ascending balloon and miss her chance to go back to Kansas. Even Toto's gray color, set off against the brightness of Oz, creates a link to the black and while of the Kansas episodes at the film's beginning. Functions, then, are almost always multiple; both narrative and stylistic elements have functions.

One useful way to grasp the function of an element is to ask what other elements demand that it be present. Thus the narrative requires that Dorothy run away from home, so Toto functions to motivate this action. Or, to take another example, Dorothy must be distinguished from the Wicked Witch, so costume,

two. Finally, the switch from black-and-white to color film functions to signal the arrival in the bright fantasy land of Oz.

Note that the concept of function does not depend on the filmmaker's intention. Often discussions of films get bogged down in the question of whether the filmmaker really knew what he or she was doing in including a certain element. In asking about function, we do not ask for a production history. From the standpoint of intention, Dorothy may sing "Over the Rainbow" because MGM wanted Judy Garland to launch a hit song. From the standpoint of function, however, we can say that Dorothy's singing that song fulfills certain narrative and stylistic functions. It establishes her desire to leave home, its reference to the rainbow foreshadows her trip through the air to the color Oz sequences, and so forth. In asking about formal function, therefore, we ask not, "How did this element get there?" but rather, "What is this element *doing* there?"

One way to notice the functions of an element is to consider the element's **motivation.** Because films are human constructs, we can expect that any one element in a film will have some justification for being there. This justification is the motivation for that element. For example, when Miss Gulch appears as the Witch in Oz, we justify her new incarnation by appealing to the fact that early scenes in Kansas have established her as a threat to Dorothy. When Toto jumps from the balloon to chase a cat, we motivate his action by appealing to notions of how dogs are likely to act when cats are around.

Sometimes people use the word "motivation" to apply only to reasons for characters' actions, as when a murderer acts from certain motives. Here, however, we will use "motivation" to apply to any element in the film which the viewer justifies on some grounds. A costume, for example, needs motivation. If we see a man in beggar's clothes in the middle of an elegant society ball, we will ask why he is dressed in this way. He could be the victim of practical jokers who have deluded him into believing that this is a masquerade. He could be an eccentric millionaire out to shock his friends. Such a scene does occur in *My Man Godfrey*. The motivation for the beggar's presence at the ball is a scavenger hunt; the young society people have been assigned to bring back, among other things, a beggar. An event, the hunt, *motivates* the presence of an inappropriately dressed character.

Motivation is so common in films that spectators tend to take it for granted. Shadowy, flickering light on a character may be motivated by the presence of a candle in the room. (We may be aware that in production the light is provided by offscreen lamps, but the candle purports to be the source and thus motivates the pattern of light.) The movement of a character across a room may motivate the moving of the camera to follow the action and keep the character within the frame. When we study principles of narrative form (Chapter 3) and nonnarrative form (Chapter 4), we will look more closely at how motivation works to give elements specific functions.

SIMILARITY AND REPETITION

In our example of the ABACA pattern, we saw how we were able to predict the next steps in the series. One reason for this was a regular pattern of

situation does not always function in the same way: In Kansas it disturbs Miss Gulch and induces Dorothy to take Toto away from home, but in Oz Toto's disruption prevents Dorothy from returning home.

Differences among the elements may often sharpen into downright opposition among them. We are most familiar with formal oppositions as clashes among characters. In *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy's desires are opposed, at various points, by the differing desires of Aunt Em, Miss Gulch, the Wicked Witch, and the Wizard, so that the film's formal system derives many dynamics from characters in conflict. But character conflict is not the only way the formal principle of difference may manifest itself. Settings, actions, and other elements may be opposed. *The Wizard of Oz* also presents color oppositions: black-and-white Kansas versus colorful Oz, Dorothy in red, white, and blue versus the Witch in black, and so on. Settings are opposed as well-not only Oz versus Kansas but also the various locales within Oz and especially the Emerald City versus the Witch's castle. Voice quality, musical tunes, and a host of other elements play off against one another, demonstrating that any motif may be opposed by any other motif.

Not all differences are simple oppositions, of course. Dorothy's three Oz friends-the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Lion-are distinguished not only by external features but by means of a three-term comparison of what they lack (brains, a heart, courage). Other films may rely on less sharp differences, suggesting a scale of gradations among the characters, as in Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game*. At the extreme, an abstract film may create minimal variations among its parts, such as in the slight changes that accompany each return of the same footage in J. J. Murphy's Print Generation.

Repetition and variation are two sides of the same coin. To notice one is to notice the other. In analyzing films, we ought to look for similarities *and* differences. Constantly poised between the two, we can point out motifs and contrast the changes they undergo, recognize parallelisms as a repetition, and still spot crucial variations.

DEVELOPMENT

One way to keep ourselves aware of how similarity and difference operate in film form is to look for principles of development from part to part of the film. Development will constitute some patterning of similar and differing elements. Our pattern ABACA is based not only on repetition (the recurring motif of A) and difference (the varied insertion of B and C) but also on a principle of *progression* which we could state as a rule (alternate A with successive letters in alphabetical order). Though simple, this is a principle of *development,* governing the form of the whole series.

Think of formal development as *a progression moving from X through Y to Z*. For example, the story of *The Wizard of Oz* shows development in many ways. It is, for one thing, a *Journey:* from Kansas through Oz to Kansas. Many films possess such a journey plot. *The Wizard of Oz* is also a *search,* beginning with an initial separation from home, tracing a series of efforts to find a way home, and ending with home being found. Within the film there is also a pattern of *mystery,* which usually has the same from-X-through-Y-to-Z pattern: We begin with a question (Who is the Wizard of

Oz?), pass through attempts to answer it, and conclude with the question answered (the Wizard is a fraud). Thus even such an apparently simple film is composed of several developmental patterns.

In order to analyze a film's pattern of development, it is usually a good idea to make a **segmentation.** A segmentation is simply a written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters. If a narrative film has ten scenes, then we can label each scene with a number running from one to ten. It may be useful to divide some parts further (for example, scenes 6a and 6b). Segmenting a film enables us not only to notice similarities and differences among parts but also to plot the overall progression of the form. A diagram may be a further help. In Chapters 3 and 4 we will consider how to segment different types of films.

Another way to size up how a film develops formally is to *compare the* beginning with the ending. By looking at the similarities and differences between the beginning and ending, we can start to understand the overall pattern of the film. We can test this advice on *The Wizard of* Oz. A comparison of the beginning and ending on the level of narrative reveals that Dorothy's journey ends with her return home; the journey has been a search for an ideal place "over the rainbow" and has turned into a search for a way back to Kansas. The final scene repeats and develops the narrative elements of the opening. Stylistically, the beginning and ending are the only parts that use black-and-white film stock. This repetition supports the contrast the narrative creates between the dreamland of Oz and the bleak landscape of Kansas.

At the film's end, the fortune teller, Professor Marvel, comes to visit Dorothy, reversing the situation of her visit to him when she had tried to run away. At the beginning he had convinced her to return home; then, as the Wizard in the Oz section, he had also represented her hopes of returning home. Finally, when she recognizes Professor Marvel and the farmhands as the basis of the characters in her dream, she remembers how much she had wanted to come home from Oz.

Earlier, we suggested that film form engages our emotions and expectations in a dynamic way. Now we are in a better position to see why. The constant interplay between similarity and difference, repetition and variation, leads the viewer to an active, developing awareness of the film's formal system. It may be handy to visualize the film's development in static terms, but we ought not to forget that formal development is a *process*.

UNITY/DISUNITY

All of the relationships among elements in a film create the total filmic system. Even if an element seems utterly out of place in relation to the rest of the film, we cannot really say that it "Isn't part of the film." At most, the unrelated element is enigmatic or incoherent. It may be a flaw in the otherwise integrated system of the film-but it *does affect* the whole film.

When all of the relationships we perceive within a film are clear and economically interwoven, we say that the film has **unity.** We call a unified film "tight," because there seem to be no gaps in the formal relationships. Every element present has a specific set of functions, similarities and

differences are determinable, the form develops logically, and there are no superfluous elements.

Unity is, however, a matter of degree. Almost no film is so tight as to leave no end dangling. For example, at one point in *The Wizard of Oz,* the Witch refers to her having attacked Dorothy and her friends with bees, yet we have never seen them, and the mention becomes puzzling. In fact, the sequence of the bee attack was shot but then cut from the finished film. The Witch's line now lacks motivation. More striking is a dangling element at the film's end. We never find out what happens to Miss Gulch; presumably she still has her legal order to take Toto away, but no one refers to this in the last scene. The viewer may be inclined to overlook this disunity, however, because Miss Gulch's parallel character, the Witch, has been killed off in the Oz fantasy and we do not expect to see her alive again. Since perfect unity is scarcely ever achieved, we ought to expect that a "unified" film may still contain some unintegrated elements or unanswered questions.

Such disunities may become particularly noticeable when the filmic system as a whole is striving for unity. If we look at unity as a criterion of evaluation, we may judge the film a failure. But unity and disunity may be looked at nonevaluatively as well, as the results of particular formal conventions.

Suppose we saw a film in which several characters die mysteriously, and we never find out how or why. This film leaves a number of loose ends, but the repetition suggests that the omission of clear explanations is not just a mistake. Our impression of a deliberate disunity would be reinforced if other elements of the film also failed to relate clearly to one another. Some films, then, create disunity as a positive quality of their form. This does not mean that these films become incoherent. Their disunity is *systematic,* and it is brought so consistently to our attention as to constitute a basic formal feature of the film.

Inevitably such films will be formally disunified only to a relative degree. They have less unity than we may be used to, but do not simply fall apart before our eyes. Later we shall see how films such as *Innocence Unprotected, Last Year at Marienbad,* and *Tout va bien* utilize formal disunity.