



1981

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Recommended Citation

Messaris, P. (1981). The Film Audience's Awareness of the Production Process. *Journal of the University Film Association*, 33 (4), 53-56. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/464

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Abstract

Christian Metz once argued that, of all the arts, film is the most capable of creating an illusion of reality in the audience's mind. It is certainly true that any movie whose chief aim is to provide vicarious experience whether of romance, adventure, horror or whatever depends precisely on the medium's ability to make the viewer forget about scripts, directors, production crews, and all other elements of "behind-the-scenes" manipulation. On the other hand, there are many circumstances in which a viewer's obliviousness to these aspects of a film probably contradicts the intentions of the film's creators. For example, a director who lavishes special attention on visual composition would no doubt be disappointed if viewers treated the images on the screen as random slices of reality. More seriously, perhaps, a viewer who loses sight of the deliberate ordering behind a movie's sequence of events is also likely to have an incomplete understanding of the implications of that movie. For these reasons, it is important to know what kind of interpretive frame of mind viewers typically bring to movies. To what extent can the filmmaker assume that audiences will be aware of his or her presence, and what kinds of circumstances are likely to heighten or diminish this awareness?

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Paul Messaris

Christian Metz once argued that, of all the arts, film is the most capable of creating an illusion of reality in the audience's mind.¹ It is certainly true that any movie whose chief aim is to provide vicarious experience whether of romance, adventure, horror or whatever—depends precisely on the medium's ability to make the viewer forget about scripts, directors, production crews, and all other elements of "behind-the-scenes" manipulation. On the other hand, there are many circumstances in which a viewer's obliviousness to these aspects of a film probably contradicts the intentions of the film's creators. For example, a director who lavishes special attention on visual composition would no doubt be disappointed if viewers treated the images on the screen as random slices of reality. More seriously, perhaps, a viewer who loses sight of the deliberate ordering behind a movie's sequence of events is also likely to have an incomplete understanding of the implications of that movie. For these reasons, it is important to know what kind of interpretive frame of mind viewers typically bring to movies. To what extent can the filmmaker assume that audiences will be aware of his or her presence, and what kinds of circumstances are likely to heighten or diminish this awareness?

According to one point of view, obliviousness to the filmmaker's manipulations may be typical of juvenile audiences, but it is not characteristic of older, "mature" viewers. This popular notion goes back to some of the earliest film research in the U.S.A.² and is based on the common-sense assumption that, as people acquire a fuller understanding of how movies are made, they develop a growing resistance to being "swept away" by the drama of on-screen events.³ Popular though this position may be, it is by no means unopposed. One familiar counterargument, which can be traced to the writings of Pudovkin⁴ and Bazin,⁵ among others, is that the style of shooting and editing developed by Hollywood filmmakers ("invisible editing") is deliberately "self-effacing" and that continuous exposure to this kind of filmmaking has dulled audiences' awareness of the filmmakers' presence. This argument is often invoked by experimental filmmakers whose "obtrusive" style (deliberately drawing attention to a film's artificiality through disjunctive editing, etc.) is seen by untutored audiences as an error. Another, related counterargument is that moviegoers become so habituated to the conventions of the big-budget commercial movies that they eventually cease to be aware that they are in fact dealing with artistic conventions, rather than faithful replicas of reality.⁶ For example, Metz has argued that certain stereotypical cinematic versions of "reality" are so firmly implanted in viewers' minds that, if some filmmaker were to put the real thing on the screen, audiences wouldn't believe it.⁷ In general, then, there are

plausible arguments on either side of the issue. This study is an attempt to examine the validity of these arguments through the use of findings from an experiment on viewers' responses to a film.⁸

The experiment was based on a short fiction film about a day in the life of an actress.⁹ The film begins at a party celebrating the successful premiere of the actress' latest movie and then follows the doings of the actress herself, who stays away from the party and spends a day wandering aimlessly through a large city. Although the early parts of the film are shot and edited in a totally "naturalistic" style, according to all of the familiar rules of Hollywood filmmaking (e.g., no jump-cuts, strict adherence to the 180-degree-line rule, eye-line matching, etc.¹⁰), the later segments are full of deliberate violations of these rules, and the story-line eventually becomes a continuous series of anti-naturalistic dislocations of time and space. For example, in one scene the actress is shown going into a clothing store but emerging into the interior of a church; while, in another scene, which takes place in a subway station, she gets on a train, leaves, and reappears shortly thereafter emerging from a train which had been following the first.

The procedure used in the experiment was, very simply, to show the film to each subject individually and then to ask the subject for a scene-by-scene account of his or her impressions while viewing, as well as subsequent reactions.¹¹ The basic aim of this procedure was to find out the extent to which subjects had had the filmmaker in mind in their responses to each of the scenes in the film. The more specific questions addressed in the analysis of the results were three: first, what would the overall tendency of viewers be: to deal with the film in terms of its creators' intentions, or to treat it as a slice of reality (albeit, perhaps, an incoherent one)? Second, would the more unconventional, "anti-naturalistic" part of the film in any way heighten viewers' awareness of the filmmakers' presence "behind-the-scenes"? Finally, might this awareness also be affected by the extent of each viewer's knowledge about filmmaking?

In order to get at the third of these questions, the experiment used three kinds of subjects: "ordinary" viewers, i.e., people with no special training about film; viewers with training in film criticism (from college courses in film) but with no production experience; and finally, viewers with extensive production experience, derived either from amateur activity or professional employment. All of the subjects were college students, and there were fifteen subjects in each category.¹² The interviews with these subjects were tape-recorded and analyzed according to a quantitative coding scheme; a description of this aspect of the experiment would be beyond the scope of this report.¹³ Instead, quotations from some of the interviews

will be used to illustrate the central findings, and a few rough figures will be used to indicate the overall trends in the results.

The most general finding to emerge from the analysis was that awareness of the filmmaker was the exception, rather than the rule, in subjects' responses to the film. On the average, no more than a third of the total number of subjects would even *mention* the filmmaker in their responses to any one scene in the film. As it happened, this tendency was particularly striking in the responses to the earlier, more conventional parts of the film. The opening scene of the film—the post-premiere party—is full of "obviously" stereotypical images of movie industry types: a person playing a director, for example, is identified by an ascot, dark glasses, a long cigarette holder, etc. Yet almost three-quarters of the subjects talked about this part of the film as if it were indistinguishable from the real thing. One subject, for instance, said that, "if I were to go to a Hollywood party, this is what I would expect to see," while another, in discussing what she took to be the typically "show-business" costumes of the people in this part of the film, argues that, "at a premiere though I've never been to one, I've always wanted to go to see one—I assume that people are dressed like that." Almost none of the subjects explicitly acknowledged the manufactured stereotypes present in these images (e.g., as one of the few exceptions put it, "the typical way they portray directors, you know, with the eyeglasses and everything").

Although this apparent "blindness" to the filmmaker's presence was characteristic of the subjects' responses to most parts of the film, some of the more extreme cases of "anti-naturalism" in this latter part of the film did seem to jolt viewers into a greater awareness of, and concern about, the filmmaker's intentions. This kind of thing happened most clearly in reference to the scene in which the actress walks into a store and is seen emerging into a church. Just over 40% of the subjects—still, perhaps, a surprisingly low figure—talked about what kind of meaning the filmmaker could have had in mind in putting together this sequence. Three examples will give the flavor of what subjects said about this scene: "When she went into the department store and they switched to her coming into the church, I didn't get the feeling that this was something that was happening later, I got the feeling that this was a directed action, that the filmmaker was saying something, in the sense not that she walked into the department store and did her shopping and three hours later she walked into the church. You know, I think that was kind of - symbolic, that, you know, that she was walking into the department store and inside it was like, you know—like this was her religion." "I thought that the intention was to, um, make some sort of statement about materialism, you know—um, clothes, money, wealth, you know, in the fact that so quickly Bonwit Teller's become a

church." "At that point I thought there was some sort of a--overobvious--metaphor of fashionable store, church, you know, I thought kind of subtle." Despite the "obviousness" which this viewer refers to, a surprisingly large number of subjects treated this scene a slice of life, i.e., as nothing more than a literal-if somewhat quick-transition from store to church. For example, these subjects would deal with such issues as whether the actress took a taxi to go from one place to the other or why she didn't have any packages with her in the church scene. (The answer to the latter question, according to one viewer, was that she must have had them sent directly to her home, as all rich movie-stars no doubt do.) It should be noted, however, that it was mainly the subjects without film-related training who gave this kind of interpretation. This observation leads to the final aspect of the findings, namely, the differences among the three types of viewers.

The only appreciable differences among the three types of viewers occurred in responses to the kind of scene discussed immediately above, namely, to those "anti-naturalistic" scenes which were most likely to heighten awareness of the filmmaker's presence "behind the scenes." While this heightening of awareness occurred to some extent with all three types of viewers, it was particularly characteristic of the viewers with actual production experience. For every one of the scenes in the latter part of the film, these viewers were by far the most likely to deal with the filmmaker's intentions (as they saw them) in their responses. This finding supports the idea that knowledge about filmmaking makes a viewer less likely to ignore the artifice in a film. However, this "effect" doesn't seem to hold in the case of indirect knowledge about film, i.e., the kind of knowledge which the critically-trained viewers in this experiment got out of their history and theory courses: these viewers were almost indistinguishable from the "ordinary" viewers as far as awareness of the film's creators was concerned.

What are the implications of these findings for the person involved in film production? If that person is concerned primarily with creating naturalistic narratives which will erase viewers' awareness of artifice, the findings of this experiment are surely encouraging: they indicate that the tendency to treat movie content as though it were a slice of reality is very strong--so strong, in fact, as to assert itself even in the presence of a relatively unusual film, viewed in the definitely unusual context of an experiment. On the other hand, for the film producer concerned with engaging viewers' awareness of the production process (whether for aesthetic, ideological, or other reasons), the findings discussed above point to clear obstacles: even in the presence of radical violations of conventional narrative techniques surprisingly large numbers of viewers cling to a view of the film screen as a mere "window on reality." Furthermore, while special knowledge

about film does seem to moderate this tendency, it is mainly direct production experience—a relative rarity—that seems to count. Since it is highly unlikely that the flood of Hollywood made images—from which, presumably, most viewers have learned the tendencies described above—will alter its course, the filmmaker who deliberately sets out to draw attention to his or her own presence must be prepared to deal with unreceptive habits on the part of the audience.

Note:

¹ Christian Metz, *Film Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp.3-15.

² W.W. Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

³ W. Dysinger and C.A. Ruckmick, *The Emotional Response of Children to the Motion Picture Situation* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Eliot Friedson, "Adult Discount: An Aspect of Children's Changing Taste," *Child Development* 24 (1953): 39-49.

⁴ V.I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), pp.54-121.

⁵ Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1967), pp. 23-40.

⁶ Bela Balazs, *Theory of the Film* (London:Dobson, 1952), pp. 33-38.

⁷ Metz, pp. 235-252.

⁸ For a more detailed account of this experiment than space permits here, see Paul Messaris, "The Influence of Film-Related Experience on Viewer's Styles of Film Interpretation," Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

⁹ The film, titled "Premiere," had been made in 1971 as a course assignment by Paul Messaris and John Tarquinio, under the supervision of Sol Worth, with funding by the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁰ See, for example, Joseph V. Mascelli, *The Five C's of Cinematography* (Hollywood: Cine-Grafic Publications, 1965).

¹¹ It should be obvious that this kind of verbal reconstruction is an imperfect way of getting at the subjects' responses while viewing (cf. Etienne Souriau, "A General Methodology for the Scientific Study of Aesthetic Appreciation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1955): 1-8). Unfortunately, this methodological limitation seems unavoidable when one wishes to study other people's responses to a film.

¹² Since all the subjects were college students and, therefore, presumably more critically-minded than most other audiences, the experiment undoubtedly overestimates the degree to which members of the "general population" are aware of the production process in films. As it happens, adjusting for this overestimation would only strengthen the conclusions of this study.

¹³ See the full technical report by Messaris (footnote 8) for these details.