The Power of Movies
Author(s): Noël Carroll
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The Power of Movies

For much of its history, film theory has been obsessed with various notions of realism. In what has come to be called classical film theory, i.e., film theory until 1965, the writings of André Bazin evince the extreme form of this obsession. Bazin held that the film image was an objective re-presentation of the past, a veritable slice of reality. In addition to this view of the ontology of film, Bazin also advanced the psychological corollary that spectators somehow regard the images on screen as identical with their referents. Contemporary film theorists reject Bazin’s metaphysics concerning the nature of the film image; influenced by semiotics, such theorists deny there is any literal sense to be made of the idea that film is some kind of natural mirror onto reality. Yet contemporary film theorists do hold onto a portion of the realist approach, notably its psychological presuppositions. That is, contemporary theorists, while rejecting the notion that film is a slice of reality, nevertheless agree that in its standard uses, film imparts a realistic effect to its viewers. This effect, a psychological effect, is described by various formulas, including the notions that film gives the impression of reality narrating itself; film causes an illusion of reality; or film appears natural.

Surely, contemporary theorists are correct in forsaking the extravagances of Bazin’s ontology of film, the great influence of his theory notwithstanding. However, contemporary film theory’s psychologizing of the realist approach, in terms of realist effects, is not very persuasive. For it requires attributing rather bizarre and frankly dubious mental states to spectators. Spectators are said to be under the illusion that the film image is its referent; or we are thought to
believe that the film image is reality narrating itself; or that the film image is somehow natural. Some of these imputed psychological effects—for example, “reality narrating itself”—sound downright incoherent. But all of these variations on the realistic effect are suspect because they attribute to spectators states of belief that would preclude our characteristic forms of response to, and appreciation of, cinema. For, were we spectators ever to mistake the representations before us for the referents those images portray, we could not sit by comfortably, inactively, and appreciatively while buffaloes stampede toward us, while lovers reveal their deepest longings to each other, and while children are tortured.  

The realist approach to film theory, either as an ontological thesis or in its more contemporary, psychologized variations, is a dead end. However, the questions that motivated the realist answers may well be worth asking. That is, what is it that the various realist approaches in film theory are designed to explain, and is it worth explaining? At least two candidates seem key here. Realism, especially as a psychological effect, is supposed to play a role in explaining the way in which film disseminates ideology, according to contemporary film theorists. Second, the attribution of realism is meant to explain the power of movies, to explain why the moving picture, including narrative TV, is the dominant art form of the twentieth century.

Certainly, “How does cinema promote ideology?” and “What makes movies powerful?” are good questions. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the second question, without resorting to the invocation of realism. We shall try to explain what makes motion pictures our dominant mass art, one that is so widespread, internationally pervasive, and accessible across boundaries of class and culture. We shall furthermore attempt to explain what makes the response to movies so intense for so many, especially when compared to art forms such as opera and theater.

The hypothesis of realism was meant to deal with such questions by suggesting that since films appear to be slices of reality, they are widely accessible insofar as everyone is familiar with reality. But the reference to reality here won’t give us much help with the intensity of our response to movies, because in large measure we conceive of the special intensity of movies exactly in contrast to our more diffuse responses to quotidian reality. Another way to put this, of course, is to point out that since our response to reality is so often lackluster,
claiming that a film appears to be a slice of reality promises no explanation of our extraordinarily intense response to films. So another explanation, one not reliant upon realism, must be found to account for the power of movies.

To begin an account of the power of movies, some characterization of the phenomenon in question is relevant. First, the word "movies," as used here, does not refer to film or cinema at large—that is, to a body of cultural productions that includes, not only commercial, narrative films, but also industrial documentaries, medical training films, ballistics tests, experimental films, modernist art films, propaganda films, and so on. Rather, "movies" refers to popular mass-media films, the products of what might be called Hollywood International—films made in what has been dubbed the "classical style," whether they be American, Italian, or Chinese, and whether they be made for the screen or for TV. Movies, in this sense, are a genre, not the whole, of cinema. It is about this genre's power that my paper is concerned. Why speak of the power of a genre of cinema rather than of the power of the medium? Well, the answer to that is simply that the medium of cinema is not, in and of itself, powerful; it is not the medium of cinema that has gripped such widespread audiences so intensely. Instead, it is the adaptation of the medium to the purposes of Hollywood International. When people speak of the power of the medium, they are, I believe, talking about the power of this particular genre or style. For it is the movies, and not modernist masterpieces or medical instruction films, that have captivated the twentieth-century popular imagination. It is the power of movies about which researchers are really curious.

To speak of movies rather than film or cinema deliberately eschews essentialism. Posing the problem in an essentialist idiom—i.e., what makes the medium of cinema powerful—would pervert the question. For neither the medium nor every style of film found in it is accessible to or intensely engaging of mass, popular audiences. Thus, plumbing the essence of the medium, if there is such a thing, would not provide the information we seek. Instead of comparing the medium of film to other media such as theater or literature, then, this paper will focus on the genre of movies in order to determine just what features of the stylistic choices of Hollywood International enable it to evoke a level of widespread, intensive engagement that is, ex hypothesis, unrivaled
by other media. Indeed, this way of stating the project is not quite accurate; for it is not the case that the genre of movies is really to be contrasted with other media, but rather that movies will be contrasted with other genres within other media. We want to know what features of movies like Red River, Psycho, and Blue Thunder make them more appealing and more intensely engaging for mass audiences than, for example, plays like King Lear and Hurlyburly, ballets like Giselle, and novels like Middlemarch. My anti-essentialism amounts to a refusal to answer questions about the power of movies in terms of the specificity of the medium of cinema. It may seem that proclaiming this variety of anti-essentialism at this late date is so much redundant arm-waving. But I'm not sure. The influence of Christian Metz's recent essay, "The Imaginary Signifier," which proceeds methodologically in an essentialist manner, trying to isolate and analyze a cinema-specific feature of the medium which he identifies as a special sort of play of presence and absence, testifies to the persistent appeal of the essentialist approach.\footnote{5}

The power of movies comprises two factors: widespread engagement and intense engagement. This paper will attempt to explain the former in terms of those features of movies that make them highly accessible to broad audiences. It will also try to explain the intensity of movies by examining those features that enable movies to depict a very high degree of clarity. In a nutshell, its thesis is that the power of movies resides in their easily graspable clarity for mass audiences.

We can begin to understand the general popularity of the movie genre by considering those features that make it generally accessible to mass, untutored audiences. A good place to start this investigation is with the image projected by the single-shot—a close-up of the hero's face, or a long-view of Castle Dracula. These images are, for the most part, representational, but, more important, they are pictorial representations. They refer to their referents by way of picturing, by displaying or manifesting a delimited range of resemblances to their referents. By recognizing these similarities, the spectator comes to know what the picture depicts, whether a man, a horse, a house, and so on.

Given that the typical movie image is a pictorial representation, what has this to do with accessibility? Well, a picture is a very special sort of symbol. Psychological evidence strongly supports the contention that we learn to recognize what a picture stands for as soon as we
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have become able to recognize the objects, or kinds of objects, that serve as the models for that picture. Picture recognition is not a skill acquired over and above object recognition. Whatever features or cues we come to employ in object recognition, we also mobilize to recognize what pictures depict. A child raised without pictorial representations will, after being shown a couple of pictures, be able to identify the referent of any picture of an object with which he or she is familiar. The rapid development of this picture-recognition capacity contrasts strongly with the acquisition of a symbol system such as language. Upon mastering a couple of words, the child is nowhere near mastering the entire language. Similarly, when an adult is exposed to one or two representational pictures in an alien pictorial idiom, say a Westerner confronting a Japanese image in the floating-point-of-view style, he will be able to identify the referent of any picture in that format after studying one or two representations of that sort for a few moments. But no Westerner, upon learning one or two linguistic symbols of the Japanese language, could go on to identify the reference of all, or even merely a few more, Japanese words. Moreover, historically the Japanese were eminently able to catch on to and replicate the Western system of perspectival picturing by examining a selection of book illustrations; but they could never have acquired any European language by learning the meanings of just a few words or phrases.

Pictorial representations thus differ radically from linguistic representations. The speed with which the former is mastered suggests that it does not require special learning, above the realization, perhaps, that flat surfaces are being used to stand for three-dimensional objects. Rather, the capacity to recognize what a picture depicts emerges in tandem with the capacity to recognize the kind of object that serves as the model of the picture. The reciprocal relation between picture recognition and object recognition, of course, explains how it is possible for us, having acquired detailed visual information from pictures, to recognize objects and places we have never encountered in real life. And, of course, the fact that pictorial recognition does not require any special learning process would also explain how movies, whose basic constituent symbols are pictures, are immediately accessible to untutored audiences in every corner of the world. These audiences do not need any special training to deal with the basic images in movies, for the capacity to recognize what
these images are about has evolved part and parcel with the viewer's capacity to recognize objects and events.

The technology of film could be adapted in such a way that the basic images of a film genre or film style were not pictorial representations. One could imagine a motion picture industry of changing abstract forms, after the fashion of Hans Richter's Rhythmus 21, or one of spectacles of color, such as Stan Brakhage's Text of Light. But that was not the road taken by the movies. Movies became a worldwide phenomenon—and a lucrative industry—precisely because in their exploitation of pictorial recognition—as opposed to symbol systems that require mastery of processes such as reading, decoding, or deciphering in order to be understood—they rely on a biological capability that is nurtured in humans as they learn to identify the objects and events in their environment.

The basic images in movies are not simply pictorial representations; they are, standardly, moving pictorial representations. But just as an audience need not go through a process of learning to "read" pictures, neither is its perception of movie "movement" learned. Rather, it is a function of the way stroboscopic or beta phenomena affect the brain's organization of congruous input presented in specifiable sequences to different points on the retina. Of course, following a movie involves much more than the capacity to recognize what its moving images represent. But we should not overlook the crucial role that the relative ease of comprehending the basic symbols of movies plays in making movies readily accessible.

The remarks thus far are apt to displease the majority of cinema researchers. For the contention that pictures (and, by extension, moving pictures) work by looking like their referents in those pertinent respects to which our perceptual system is keyed, goes against the contemporary received wisdom that pictures, like any other symbol, are matters of codes and conventions. Undoubtedly, some reader will recall an anthropology class in which he was told that certain non-Western peoples were unable to understand pictures shown to them by missionaries and other field workers. However, this evidence has never been entirely decisive. Complaints about the fidelity of the photographs involved have been raised, along with the more serious objection that what the subjects failed to understand, and then only initially, was the practice of using flat surfaces to portray three-dimensional objects. Once they got the hang of that,
they had no trouble in recognizing what hitherto unseen pictures referred to—assuming they were familiar with the kinds of objects displayed in the pictures. Also, on the non-conventionalist side of the scale, we must weigh the psychological evidence of the child’s acquisition of pictorial recognition, the easy cross-cultural dissemination of pictorial practices, and the zoological evidence that certain animals have the capacity for pictorial recognition, against exotic anecdotes that are meant to demonstrate that the practices of picturing are cultural conventions that must be learned in the fashion of a language. We can consider our own cases. We all recall our own language acquisition, and we know how to go about helping youngsters to learn to speak and to read. But who remembers undergoing a similar process in regard to pictures, and what techniques would we employ to teach a youngster pictorial literacy? Yes, we may show a child a few pictures and say the name of the object portrayed. But very shortly the child just sees what the picture is of; the child doesn’t “read” the picture or decode it or go through some process of inference. And from a meager set of samples, the child can proceed to identify the subjects of a plethora of pictures, because there is a continuum between apprehending pictorial representations and perceiving the world that does not depend upon learning anything like the conventional, arbitrary correlations of a vocabulary, or the combinatory principles of a grammar.

There is undoubtedly a temptation to think that picture recognition involves some process of decoding or inference because of the contemporary influence of the computational metaphor of the mind. We think that computers supply us with powerful insight into how the mind works. And if we were to build a computer to simulate pictorial recognition, it would require a complex information-processing system. But it does not follow that if computers employ complex information-processing systems in pictorial recognition, then humans must likewise possess such systems. It may rather be that our neurophysiology is so constructed that when stimulated by certain pictorial arrays, we see what the picture is of. John Searle notes that balance is controlled by the fluids in our inner ear. Were a robot to be built, balance would probably be governed by some complex computational program. But, for us, balance is a matter governed by our fleshy hardware. A similar case might be made that biology—rather than information processing—may have a great
deal to tell us about the workings of object recognition and picture recognition. And to the extent that pictorial representation is a matter of the way in which humans are made, a practice rooted in pictorial representation—such as the movies—will be widely and easily accessible to all humans made that way.

Many contemporary semiotically inclined film theorists resist approaching pictorial representation in the movies in the preceding fashion. Their resistance rests on a confusion, or rather a conflation, on their part of the ideas of code, convention, and culture; terms that in film studies are treated as equivalent. If something is coded or conventional, then it is regarded as a cultural production. This seems fair enough. But it is more problematic to presume, as film researchers do, the opposite; that if something is a cultural product, then it is an example of coded or conventional phenomena. Thus, if pictorial representations, including moving, pictorial representations, are cultural productions, which they certainly are, then they must be conventional. The difficulty here lies in the assumption that everything that is cultural is necessarily conventional.

Consider plows. They are cultural productions. They were produced by certain agricultural civilizations that had culturally specific needs not shared, for example, by hunter-gatherers. Is the design of a plow a matter of convention? Recall, here, that for semiotic film theorists, arbitrariness is a key defining feature of a convention. That is, a group creates a convention—like driving on the right side of the road—when there are a number of alternative ways of dealing with the situation and when the choice between these alternatives is arbitrary, a matter of fiat. But the adoption of the design of the plow could not have been reached by fiat. The plow had a purpose—digging furrows—and its effectiveness had to be accommodated to the structure of nature. It would have to be heavy enough and sharp enough to cut into the earth, and it had to be adapted to the capacities of its human users—it had to be steerable and pullable by creatures like us with two arms and limited strength. A device such as a plow had to be discovered; it could not be brought into existence by consensus. We could not have elected pogo-sticks to do the work of plows. The plow was a cultural invention, not a cultural convention. It was adopted because it worked, because it met a cultural need by accommodating features of nature and biology.
The point of introducing the concept of a cultural invention here is, of course, to block the facile identification of the cultural and the conventional. Applied to the sort of pictorial representations found in movies, this concept suggests that pictorial representations may be cultural inventions, inventions that, given the way people are built, cause spectators who are untrained in any system of conventions to recognize what pictures stand for. The structure of such images is not determinable by a mere decision. Given the constraints of the human perceptual apparatus, we cannot decree that anything looks like anything else, though we may decree that anything can stand for anything else. It seems cogent to suppose that this limitation is in large measure attributable to human biology. And insofar as movies are constituted of a mode of representation connected to biological features of the human organism, they will be generally more accessible than genres in other media, such as the novel, that presuppose the mastery of learned conventions such as specific natural languages. Also, if the recognition of movie images is more analogous to a reflex than it is to a process like reading, then following a movie may turn out to be less taxing, less a matter of active effort, than reading. Perhaps this can be confirmed by recalling how much easier it is to follow a movie when one is fatigued than it is to read a novel.

The claim has so far been made that a crucial element in the power of movies is the fact that movies usually rely, in terms of their basic imagery, on pictorial representations that allow masses of untutored spectators easy access to the fundamental symbols in the system, due to the way humans are constructed. But is this not just a reversion to the kind of realist explanation we began by dismissing? Not at all. The Bazinian claims that the spectator somehow takes the film image to be identical with its referent, while contemporary film theorists hold that the typical film image imparts the illusion of reality, transparency, or naturalness. This paper, though, has not invoked any of these realist, psychological effects, nor anything like them. It has instead claimed that the untutored spectator recognizes what the film image represents without reference to a code; it has not claimed that the spectator takes the pictorial representation to be, in any sense, its referent. Man’s perceptual capacities evolve in such a way that his capacity for pictorial recognition comes, almost naturally, with his capacity for object recognition, and part of that capacity is the ability to differentiate pictures from their referents. Thus, we are
not talking about a realist, psychological effect—the taking of a representation for its referent—but only about the capacity of movies to exploit generic, recognitional abilities. Another way to see the difference between this approach and that of the realists is to note how often their accounts of the power of movies emphasize the importance of the fact that movies are photographic, whereas in the account offered here the important technology for explaining the accessibility of movies is the non-cinema-specific technology of pictorial representation.

If up to this point anything can be said to have been demonstrated, then, admittedly, it must also be conceded that we are a good distance away from a full account of the power of movies. We have explained why movies are more accessible than genres like novels. But what features of movies account for their presumably superior accessibility and intensity in comparison with media and genres like drama, ballet, and opera, in which recognition of what the representations refer to is, like movies, typically not mediated by learned processes of decoding, reading, or inference? What standard features of movies differentiate them from the standard features of the presentation of plays, for example, in a way that make typical movies more accessible than typical theatrical performances? Our hypothesis is that due to certain devices developed early in the evolution of movies, the typical movie is, all things being equal, easier to follow than the typical play, i.e., theatrical performances as have so far been commonly encountered. This caveat is added because there is no reason to believe that theatrical devices that would be functionally equivalent to the movie devices about to be discussed could not be invented, thus changing the relative accessibility of typical movies and typical plays. Our anti-essentialist bias, however, demands that we not compare the eternal essence of the film medium with its putative theatrical counterpart, but rather the state of the art of movies with the state of the art of theatrical production.

Movies are said to be more accessible than plays. What does this mean? We have asserted that movies are easier to follow than plays. What is it that is distinctive about the way in which spectators follow movies? With the typical movie, given certain of its characteristic devices, notably variable framing, the movie viewer is generally in a position where he or she is attending to exactly what is significant in the action-array or spectacle on screen. Another way of getting at this
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point is to say that the filmmaker in the movie genre has far more potential control over the spectator’s attention than does the theatrical director. The consequence of this is that the movie spectator is always looking where he or she should be looking, always attending to the right details and thereby comprehending, nearly effortlessly, the ongoing action precisely in the way it is meant to be understood. Due to various devices, such as variable framing, movies are easier to follow and, therefore, more accessible than theatrical productions because movies are more perspicuous cognitively. The element of cognitive clarity afforded by movies may well account, too, for the widespread intensity of engagement that movies elicit.

Of course, movies and standard theatrical productions share many of the same devices for directing the audience’s attention. Both in the medium-long shot and on the proscenium stage, the audience’s attention can be guided by: the central positioning of an important character; movement in stasis; stasis in movement; characters’ eyelines; light colors on dark fields; dark colors on light fields; sound, notably dialogue; spotlighting and variable illumination of the array; placement of important objects or characters along arresting diagonals; economy of set details; makeup and costume; commentary; gestures; and so on. But movies appear to have further devices and perhaps more effective devices for directing attention than does theater as it is presently practiced. The variability of focus in film, for example, is a more reliable means of making sure that the audience is looking where the spectator “ought” to be looking than is theatrical lighting. Even more important is the use in movies of variable framing. Through cutting and camera movement, the filmmaker can rest assured that the spectator is perceiving exactly what she should be perceiving at the precise moment she should be perceiving it. When the camera comes in for a close-up, for example, there is no possibility that the spectator can be distracted by some detail stage-left. Everything extraneous to the story at that point is deleted. Nor does the spectator have to find the significant detail; it is delivered to her. The viewer also gets as close or as far-off a view of the significant objects of the story—be they heroines, butcher knives, mobs, fortresses, or planets—as is useful for her to have a concrete sense of what is going on. Whereas in a theater the eye constantly tracks the action—often at a felt distance, often amidst a vaulting space—in movies much of that work is done by shifting camera
positions, which at the same time also assures that the average viewer has not gotten lost in the space but is looking precisely at that which she is supposed to see. Movies are therefore easier to follow than typical stage productions, because the shifting camera positions make it practically impossible for the movie viewer not to be attending where she is meant to attend.

Variable framing in film is achieved by moving the camera closer or farther away from the objects being filmed. Cutting and camera movement are the two major processes for shifting framing: in the former, the actual process of the camera’s change of position is not included in the shot; we jump from medium-range views, to close views, to far-off views with the traversal of the space between excised; in camera movement, as the name suggests, the passage of the camera from a long view to a close view is recorded within the shot. Reframing can also be achieved optically through devices such as zooming-in and changing lenses. These mechanical means for changing the framing of an on-screen object or event give rise to three formal devices for directing the movie audience’s attention: indexing, bracketing, and scaling. Indexing occurs when a camera is moved toward an object. The motion toward the object functions ostensibly, like the gesture of pointing. It indicates that the viewer ought to be looking in the direction the camera is moving, if the camera’s movement is being recorded, or in the direction toward which the camera is aimed or pointing, if we have been presented with the shot via a cut.

When a camera is moved towards an array, it screens out everything beyond the frame. To move a camera toward an object either by cutting or camera movement generally has the force of indicating that what is important at this moment is what is on screen, what is in the perimeter of the frame. That which is not inside the frame has been bracketed, excluded. It should not, and in fact it literally cannot, at the moment it is bracketed, be attended to. At the same time, bracketing has an inclusionary dimension, indicating that what is inside the frame or bracket is important. A standard camera position will mobilize both the exclusionary and inclusionary dimensions of the bracket to control attention, though the relative degree may vary as to whether a given bracketing is more important for what it excludes, rather than what it includes, and vice-versa.
There is also a standard deviation from this use of bracketing. Often the important element of a scene is placed outside the frame so that it is not visible onscreen, e.g., the child-killer in the early part of Fritz Lang's *M*. Such scenes derive a great deal of their expressive power just because they subvert the standard function of bracketing.

As the camera is moved forward, it not only indexes and places brackets around the objects in front of it; it also changes their scale. Whether by cutting or camera movement, as the camera nears the gun on the table, the gun simultaneously appears larger and occupies more screen space. When the camera is pulled away from the table, the gun occupies less screen space. This capacity to change the scale of objects through camera positioning—a process called "scaling"—can be exploited for expressive or magical effects. Scaling is also a lever for directing attention. Enlarging the screen size of an object generally has the force of stating that this object, or gestalt of objects, is the important item to attend to at this moment in the movie.

Scaling, bracketing, and indexing are three different ways of directing the movie spectator's attention through camera positioning. In general, a standard camera positioning, whether executed by cutting or camera movement, will employ all three of these means. But one can easily think of scenes in which the bracket is reoriented, but the scaling stays effectively the same, for example, a lateral pan as a character walks toward the edge of the frame. Likewise, a camera movement might be important for what it indexes rather than for whatever changes occur in the bracketing or the scaling: there are moving shots in the early Italian film *Cabiria*, for example, where the camera nudges a few feet forward in a spectacle scene in order to point the viewer's eye in a certain direction, though neither the bracket nor the scale of the objects in the scene are changed appreciably. Both the swamp scene and the trolley-car scene in *Sunrise* are artistically important for the way in which they call attention to the bracket, rather than for their scaling or indexing. However, bracketing, scaling, and indexing can be employed in tandem, and when they are, they afford very powerful means by which the movie-maker controls the audience's attention. We suddenly see a close-up of a gun, indexed, scaled, and bracketed as the important object in the scene, and then the bracket is changed—we see a medium shot in which the gun is being pointed at the heroine by the villain, telling us that now the important thing about the gun is its
role within this newly framed context or gestalt. The constant reframing of the action that is endemic to movies enables the spectator to follow the action perfectly, and, so to say, automatically.

Adaptations of stage technology, of course, could probably establish theatrical means that would be functionally equivalent to the scaling, bracketing, and indexing functions of movies. Magnifying mirrors might be used to enlarge stage details at appropriate moments; the leg curtains could be motorized to constantly reframe the action; and indexing might be approximated by use of revolving stages that rotate the important characters and actions toward the audience. If these devices were not too distracting in and of themselves, they might provide the theater director with attentional levers that are functionally equivalent to scaling, bracketing, and indexing. However, these devices are not customary in theater as we presently know it, and our project here is to contrast movies as they are with theater as it currently is.

Of course, films can be made without variable framing; but movies rely on variable framing to automatize the spectator’s attention. Also, variable framing is not unique to movies; other film genres employ it. Yet it is key to why movies are accessible; as we have noted, it contributes to the intensity of engagement movies promote. Through variable framing, the director assures that the spectator is attending where and when she should. The action and its details unfold in such a way that every element that is relevant is displayed at a distance that makes it eminently recognizable and, in a sequence that is intelligible. Ideally, variable framing allows us to see just what we need to see at changing distances and at cadences that render the action perspicuous. The action is analytically broken down into its most salient elements, distilled, that is, in a way that makes it extremely legible. This kind of clarity, which is bequeathed to the audience automatically by variable framing, contrasts strongly with the depiction of action in theatrical representations. There, the depiction is not analytic but a matter of physical enactment, generally occurring in something approximating real time, and presented at a fixed distance to each viewer. Of course, theatrical action is abstracted, simplified, for the sake of legibility, often employing emblematic gestures. It is clearer, that is, than the actions we encounter in everyday life. But theatrical action is not as clear and analytically distinct as movie action as portrayed by variable framing. Movie action, given the way
it can be organized through camera positioning, is also far more intelligible than the unstaged events we witness in everyday life. This is an important feature that helps account for the way in which movies grip us.

Our experience of actions and events in movies differs radically from our normal experiences; movie actions and events are so organized, so automatically intelligible, and so clear. The arresting thing about movies, contra realist theories, is not that they create the illusion of reality, but that they reorganize and construct, through variable framing, actions and events with an economy, legibility, and coherence that are not only automatically available, but which surpass, in terms of their immediately perceptible basic structure, naturally encountered actions and events. Movie actions evince visible order and identity to a degree not found in everyday experience. This quality of uncluttered clarity gratifies the mind’s quest for order, thereby intensifying our engagement with the screen.

So far, our speculations about the sources of the power of movies have been restricted to what would have classically been considered the medium’s “cinematic features”: pictorial representation and variable framing. This, of course, does not reflect a belief that these elements are uniquely cinematic, but only that they are features that help account for movies’ power, the capacity to engender what appears to be an unprecedentedly widespread and intense level of engagement. There is another core defining features of what we are calling movies that needs to be treated: this is that they are fictional narratives. The question naturally arises to what degree this fact about movies can help explain their power.

The fact that movies tend to be narrative, concerned primarily with depictions of human actions, immediately suggests one of the reasons they are accessible. For narrative is, in all probability, our most pervasive and familiar means of explaining human action. If you ask me why George is watering the tulips, I may answer that George intends to have, or wants, a beautiful garden, and that he believes that he can’t have a beautiful garden unless he waters the tulips. So I say he undertakes to water the tulips. You might ask me how he formed the desire to have a beautiful garden. I may refer to either his belief that this is a means to being a good citizen or his guilt about never caring for his father’s garden, or both if his action is overdetermined. If you ask, where did he get the notion that the
garden would not be beautiful unless he watered it, I say he read it in a book called Beautiful Gardens on May 17, 1953. Now if we tried to sum up this somewhat banal explanation of George’s action, a narrative would probably be the likeliest, though not the only, means of organizing our information: George, racked with guilt feelings about his father’s tulips and convinced that a beautiful garden is a means to the coveted ideal of good citizenship, decided to have a beautiful garden; and when he read, on May 17, 1953, that such gardens could not be had without watering the tulips, he went out and watered the tulips (on May 18). We might add that he continued to do so happily ever after. Insofar as this sort of narrative is one of the most common forms of human explanation, and insofar as much movie narration belongs to this category, movies will be familiar and accessible. Moreover, the explanatory quality of such narration will also contribute to the clarity of movies.

Of course, the logical relations that subend this sort of narrative, at crucial points, remind one, and are parasitic upon, those of practical inference. If I am George, for example, I reason thusly: I want a beautiful garden; I do not believe I can secure a beautiful garden unless I water the tulips; therefore, I proceed to water the tulips. What makes narratives of the sort that I told above explanatory is that they, at nodal moments, reflect processes of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is part of everyone’s life. And the actions of others are intelligible to me when I can see them as consequences of the sort of practical reasoning I employ. Insofar as movie narratives depict the human actions of characters in forms that are reflective of the logic of practical inference, the movies will be widely accessible, since practical inference is a generic form of human decision-making.

Undoubtedly, this discussion of narrative may be too broad and too abstract to be of much use to the film analyst. In all probability nothing of great interest would be gained in film studies by showing that a series of scenes reflected a series of practical inferences on the part of characters. Rather, the film scholar will be interested in an analysis of the characteristic forms of plotting found in movies; she will want these described more specifically than they were in the preceding discussion. And she will want to know what it is about these forms, if anything, that contributes to the power of movies.
In a recent paper on film suspense, I attempted to identify what I think is the most basic form of movie plotting, and I would like to take advantage of those speculations now. My position owes a great deal to the Soviet filmmaker and theoretician V.I. Pudovkin. Pudovkin, like his teacher, L. Kuleshov, studied American movies, contrasting them with Russian films in order to discern what made the American films of the twenties more effective on popular audiences than were comparable Russian films. Pudovkin and Kuleshov undertook this investigation, of course, in order to calculate the best means for creating a new Soviet cinema for the masses. The theories of filmmaking they produced were meant to instruct other filmmakers in technique and praxis. As is well known, Pudovkin and Kuleshov tended to become very prescriptive in these matters, a tendency for which they have been duly chastised ever since. But whatever their dogmatism, we should not overlook the fact that beneath their debatable prescriptions about the way films should be made, they often had valuable insights into the way in which popular films, especially Hollywood movies, were actually constructed. What Pudovkin has to say about movie narration is a case in point.

A story film will portray a sequence of scenes or events, some appearing earlier, some later. A practical problem that confronts the filmmaker is the way in which these scenes are to be connected, i.e., what sort of relation the earlier scenes should bear to the later ones. Pudovkin recommends—as a primary, though not exclusive, solution—that earlier scenes be related to later scenes as questions are to answers. If a giant shark appears offshore, unbeknownst to the local authorities, and begins to ravage lonely swimmers, this scene or series of scenes (or this event or series of events) raises the question of whether the shark will ever be detected. This question is likely to be answered in some later scene when someone figures out why all those swimmers are missing. At that point, when it is learnt that the shark is very, very powerful and nasty to boot, the question arises about whether it can be destroyed or driven away. The ensuing events in the film serve to answer that question. Or, if some atomic bombs are skyjacked in the opening scenes, this generates questions about who stole them and for what purposes. Once the generally nefarious purposes of the hijacking are established, the question arises concerning whether these treacherous intents can be thwarted. Or, for a slightly more complicated scenario, shortly after a jumbo jet takes off,
we learn that the entire crew has just died from food poisoning while also learning that the couple in first class is estranged. These scenes raise the questions of whether the plane will crash and whether the couple in first class will be reconciled by their common ordeal. Maybe we also ask whether the alcoholic priest in coach will find God again. It is the function of the later scenes in the film to answer these questions.

Of course, the narrative organization of Hollywood films is far more complex than these examples suggest, and I have tried to develop this subject with more precision elsewhere. For present purposes, let us say that, as is suggested by the writings of Pudovkin, the core narrative structures of Hollywood-type films—the movies discussed in this paper—involves and generating questions that ensuing scenes answer. Not all narrative films employ this approach. Often, modernist films generate questions—e.g., did I meet her at Marienbad before?—without supplying any answers. Or, I might chronicle my day at the beach: first I had a hot dog, then I put on suntan lotion, then I swam, then I went home. Surely we can conceive of a home movie like this, where none of the early scenes raised any questions, and where none of the later scenes supplied any answers. Thus, to narrate by generating questions internal to the film that subsequent scenes answer is a distinctive form of narration. Admittedly, this is not a form unique to films or movies, for it is also exploited in mystery novels, adventure stories, Harlequin romances, Marvel comics, and so on. Nevertheless, it is the most characteristic narrative approach in movies.

How can this be proven? The best suggestion one can make here is to embrace the question/answer model of movie narration—what I call the erotetic model of narrative—and then turn on your TV, watch old movies and new ones, TV adventure series and romances, domestic films and foreign popular films. Ask yourself why the later scenes in the films make sense in the context of the earlier scenes. My prediction is that you will be surprised by the extent to which later scenes are answering questions raised earlier, or are at least providing information that will contribute to such answers. In adopting the hypothesis that the narrative structure of a randomly selected movie is fundamentally a system of internally generated questions that the movie goes on to answer, you will find that you have hold of a relationship that enables you to explain what makes certain scenes
especially key: they either raise questions or answer them, or perform related functions including sustaining questions already raised, or incompletely answering a previous question, or answering one question but then introducing a new one.

Apart from the confirmation of the hypothesis afforded by this confrontation with empirical data, further support for the question/answer model might be gained by using it, not to analyze, but to develop movie scenarios. For when certain complexities and qualifications are added to the model of the erotetic narrative, it is a very serviceable guide for producing stories that strike one as typically "movieish," especially in their economy. Partial confirmation of the question/answer model is its capacity to direct the simulation of movie scenarios.

If the model of the erotetic narrative captures the characteristic narrative form of movies, then perhaps we can note certain features of this mode of narration which will shed light on the power of movies. A movie scene or a series of depicted events make certain questions salient. An orphan wanders the street, importuning adults needfully. Will the orphan find a surrogate parent? This could be answered in the next scene, or it could take the entire film to answer. However, by characterizing the function of this scene as that of saliently posing a question, we have put ourselves in a position to account for one of the most notable features of audience responses to linear narrative movies, that is, expectation. Given the erotetic model, we can say what it is that audiences expect: they expect answers to the questions that earlier events have made salient—will the shark be stopped; will the jumbo jet crash? If it is a general feature of our cognitive make-up that, all things being equal, we not only want but expect answers to questions that have assertively been put before us, this helps explain our widespread, intense engagement with movies. Even if the question is as insignificant to us as whether the suburban adolescent in Risky Business will be found out by his parents, our curiosity keeps us riveted to the screen until it is satisfied.

Though space does not allow for a full elaboration of the matter, important distinctions can be made among the different types of questions that animate the erotetic movie narrative. One such distinction can be drawn between micro-questions and macro-questions. A scene or an event may raise a question that is immediately answered in the succeeding scene or by the succeeding
event, or by a scene or event temporally proximate to the questioning scene. For example, some burglars trigger an alarm. This raises the question of whether the authorities will hear it. Next, there is a scene of two policemen reading magazines in their squad car; they look up and switch on their siren, raising the question of whether they will arrive at the scene of the crime on time, and so on. Such localized networks of questions and answers are “micro” in nature. They connect two individual scenes or a limited series of scenes and sequences. But movies are also generally animated by macro-questions, ones for which we await answers throughout most of the film, and which may be thought of as organizing the bulk of significant action in the movie—indeed, the micro-questions are generally hierarchically subordinate to the macro-questions. For an example of a macro-question, consider Wargames; at a certain point most of the action is devoted to answering the question of whether nuclear destruction can be averted. Of course, movies often have more than one macro-question. Into the Night asks both whether the romantic leads can escape the Middle Eastern villains and whether this couple will become lovers. Both macro-questions are answered by means of roughly the same sequences of action, and the micro-questions and answers that structure those sequences tend, finally, to dovetail with the answers to these presiding macro-questions. What is called “closure” in movies can be explained as that moment when all the saliently posed and sustained questions that the movie has raised have been answered.

A successful erotetic narrative tells you, literally, everything you want to know about the action being depicted, i.e., it answers every question, or virtually every question, that it has chosen to pose saliently. (I say “virtually” in order to accommodate endings such as that in the original Invasion of the Body Snatchers, where the audience is left with one last pregnant question.) But even counternancing these cases, an erotetic movie narrative has an extraordinary degree of neatness and intellectually appealing compactness. It answers all the questions that it assertively presents to the audience, and the largest portion of its actions is organized by a small number of macro-questions, with little remainder. The flow of action approaches an ideal of uncluttered clarity. This clarity contrasts vividly with the quality of the fragments of actions and events we typically observe in everyday life. Unlike those in real life, the actions observed
in movies have a level of intelligibility, due to the role they play in the erotic narrative's system of questions and answers. Because of the question/answer structure, the audience is left with the impression that it has learned everything important to know concerning the action depicted. How is this achieved? By assertively introducing a selected set of pressing questions and then answering them—by controlling expectation by the manner in which questions are posed. This imbues the film with an aura of clarity while also affording an intense satisfaction concerning our cognitive expectations and our propensity for intelligibility.

The clarity imparted by the erotic narrative in movies is, of course, reinforced by other clarity-producing methods, such as directing audience attention through the single shot or variable framing. These devices are the filmmaker's means of visual narration. They enable him to raise questions visually: the question "Will Jones be shot?" can be "asked" by focusing on a close-up of a gun. At the same time, the visual depiction of an action can either sustain or answer a question. "Will Eli Wallach die by hanging?" can be sustained by showing him teetering on a chair with a noose around his neck, or answered by showing Clint Eastwood severing the rope in an act of super-human marksmanship. Of course, many of the pressing questions that drive movies forward are not primarily set forth visually but are stated explicitly in the dialogue, or are already implied in the scripting of the action. Nevertheless, the devices of visual narration, if not the original source of the questions, help make those questions salient.

The visual devices of movies were earlier described in terms of the type of clarity they afforded the audience, of how they enable the audience to see all that it is relevant for them to see at the appropriate distance and in the appropriate sequence. At the same time, another sort of clarity has been attributed to the erotic narrative as a primary ground of the power of movies. How do these two "clarities" relate to each other? Well, generally in movies, devices such as scaling, bracketing, and indexing will be employed so that the first item or the first gestalt of items that the audience is led to attend to in a given shot is the item or gestalt that is most relevant to the progress of the narrative—to the posing, sustaining, or answering of those questions the movie elects to answer. The importance of variable framing for movies is the potential it affords for assuring that
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the audience attends to everything that is relevant, and that it does so automatically, so to speak. "Relevance" is here determined by the narrative, or, more specifically the questions and answers that drive the narrative, which in turn are saliently posed and answered in important ways by means of variable framing.

In order for this account to be adequate, certain qualifications need to be acknowledged. While generally processes such as variable framing are coordinated with the narrative for the purpose of emphasizing the first item, or gestalt of items, seen by the audience, there are standard deviations to this principle. These deviations are often employed in thrillers for shock effect: the important subject, say, the killer, is hidden in the shot in such a way that the audience only comes to see him belatedly (but unavoidably). In terms of our account, these deviations are not destructive counterexamples, because they still illustrate how the flow of narration is kept under strict control and the audience in rapt attention.

Standard movies also often contain much material that is digressive from the point of view of the erotetic narrative, for example, a melodic interlude from the heroine by the campfire in a Western. While this paper cannot fully develop a theory of such digressions, it will suggest that the most important digressions typically found in movies are a function of the sub-genres the movies in question belong to (one could go on to explain those digressions by analyzing the sub-genres they most frequently appear in and, perhaps, proceed to analyze the power of those sub-genres).

We began by addressing the issue of the power of movies, which was understood as a question concerning the ways in which movies have engaged the widespread, intense response of untutored audiences throughout the century. We have dealt with the issue of the widespread response to movies by pointing to those features of movies that make them particularly accessible. We have also dealt with our intense engagement with movies in terms of the impression of coherence they impart, i.e., their easily grasped, indeed, their almost unavoidable, clarity. The accessibility of movies is at least attributable to their use of pictorial representation, variable framing, and narrative, the latter being the most pervasive form of explaining human actions. Their clarity is at least a function of variable framing in coordination with the erotetic narrative, especially where erotetic
narration and variable framing are coordinated by the principle that the first item or gestalt of items the audience apprehends be that which, out of alternative framings, is most important to the narration. In short, this thesis holds that the power of movies—their capacity to evoke unrivaled widespread and intense response—is, first and foremost, at least a result of their deployment of pictorial representation, variable framing, and the erotetic narrative.

It will undoubtedly be noted that in this attempt to account for the power of movies, we have restricted our purview to features in movies which address the cognitive faculties of the audience. This is absolutely central to the argument. For only by focusing on cognitive capacities, especially ones as deeply embedded as pictorial representation, practical reason, and the drive to get answers to our questions, will we be in the best position to find the features of movies that account for their phenomenally widespread effectiveness; since cognitive capacities, at the level discussed, seem the most plausible candidate for what mass-movie audiences have in common. That is, the question of the power of movies involves explaining how peoples of different cultures, societies, nations, races, creed, educational backgrounds, age groups, and sexes can find movies easily accessible and gripping. Thus, the power of movies must be connected to some fairly generic features of human organisms to account for their power across class, cultural, and educational boundaries. The structures of perception and cognition are primary examples of fairly generic features of humans. Consequently, it seems that if we can suggest the ways in which movies are designed to engage and excite cognitive and perceptual structures, we will have our best initial approximation of their generic power.

Some qualifications, of course, are in order. First, we are not claiming that people do not respond intensely to forms other than movies; indeed, some people respond more intensely to other art forms than they do to movies. There are opera buffs and balletomanes, after all. But this is compatible with the claim we are examining, that there is something special about the widespread and intense, though not necessarily universal, response that movies have been observed to command.

Next, we are not denying that there may be levers beyond those we have discussed that also figure in the account of the power of movies. Marketing structures, including advertising, are important elements,
as well as factors such as the transportability and reproducability of movies. Research in these areas should not be abandoned. However, considerations along these lines do not obviate the present sort of speculation, since there must still be something about the product, so marketed, that sustains interest.

Pictorial representations, variable framing, erotetic narration, and the interrelation of these elements in the ways proposed will, at the very least, be constituents of any account of the power of movies. This paper does not pretend to have offered a complete account of why movies are powerful—its modesty is signaled by the hedge “at the very least.” Perhaps movies employ other clarifying features, such as music, that require analysis. Furthermore, apart from the question of why movies are powerful, we may wish to pursue different, but related, questions about why certain movies or groups of movies are powerful for certain groups of people; how do movies, or at least certain varieties of movies, engage particular classes, nations, genders, and so on. Theoretical interest in these questions would undoubtedly lead to a focus on elements of structure and content that have not been addressed here, since we have been concerned with the generic power of movies, not the power of movies for specific times, locales, sexes, and interest groups. However, nothing we have said suggests an objection in principle to these more specific questions, which questions, of course, will, in all probability, lead to speculation about aspects of audiences over and above their cognitive faculties. Social conditioning and affective psychology, appropriately historicized, must be introduced to explain the power of given movies for target groups. Sociology, anthropology, and certain forms of psychoanalysis are likely to be useful in such investigations. We can therefore continue to examine the power of movies by asking about the power of certain movies for historically specific audiences. However, if we wish to explain the power of movies for the world community, then pictorial representation, variable framing, and the erotetic narrative will be key elements in our account because of the ways in which they address common cognitive and perceptual capacities.
ENDNOTES

The preparation of this paper has benefited from extensive discussions with David Bordwell, as well as from helpful comments by Annette Michelson and Ian Jarvie.

1See André Bazin, What is Cinema? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), especially vol. I.

2For an example of an author who employs these approaches, see John Ellis, Visible Fictions: Cinema, TV, Video (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).


4The question of film’s ideological operation is also a good one, one I shall take up in another essay currently in preparation.

5This essay is in Christian Metz’s The Imaginary Signifier (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982). I criticize Metz’s approach in a review of this book in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Winter 1984.


12Noel Carroll, “Toward a Theory of Film Suspense,” in Persistence of Vision: The Journal of the Film Faculty of the City University of New York, #1, 1984.

13V.I. Pudovkin, Film Technique and Film Acting (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

14Carroll, “Toward a Theory of Film Suspense,” op. cit.