



Kevin McDonald

Film Theory

the basics

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FILM THEORY

THE BASICS

“Many introductions to film theory confuse and confound the beginner. Kevin McDonald’s addition to Routledge’s ‘The Basics’ is different. It is one of the most accessible introductions to film theory currently available, and should become the first stop for students embarking on any future study of film theory.”

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Film Theory: The Basics provides an accessible introduction to the key theorists, concepts, and debates that have shaped the study of moving images. It examines film theory from its emergence in the early twentieth century to its study in the present day, and explores why film has drawn special attention as a medium, as a form of representation, and as a focal point in the rise of modern visual culture.

The book emphasizes how film theory has developed as a historically contingent discourse, one that has evolved and changed in conjunction with different social, political, and intellectual factors. To explore this fully, the book is broken down into the following distinct sections:

- Theory before theory, 1915–60
- French theory, 1949–68
- Screen theory, 1969–96
- Post-theory, 1996–2015

Complete with questions for discussion and a glossary of both key terms and key theorists, *Film Theory: The Basics* is an invaluable resource for those new to film studies and for anyone else interested in the history and significance of critical thinking in relation to the moving image.

Kevin McDonald is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, Northridge where he teaches popular culture and cultural theory. His research focuses on film theory and contemporary Hollywood. He is currently co-editing a collection titled *The Netflix Effect*.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, film has drawn the interest of intellectuals, critics, artists, and scholars. Collectively, this group has asked questions about film's fundamental qualities, its distinctive features, and its various effects. These questions eventually merged with broader debates about aesthetics, technology, culture, and society. And as these exchanges became the basis for an increasingly academic form of inquiry, they fostered their own specific set of terms, methods, and rhetorical positions. Together, these developments comprise film theory; the body of writing devoted to the critical understanding of film as a medium and as a vital part of visual culture more broadly.

As a critical enterprise, film theory is relatively young. Its formation has nevertheless been wide-ranging and, at times, tumultuous. In the first part of the twentieth century, film theory consisted of a distinctly international assortment of writers and thinkers. They mostly worked in isolation from one another and approached the new medium of film from a variety of different backgrounds. They were often driven to theorize film as a matter of circumstance or out of personal interest. Sergei Eisenstein, for example, proffered theoretical views about montage as a way to both supplement and expound his own filmmaking practices. While the work of these early pioneers helped to establish the merits of moving images by the mid-point of the twentieth century, this same period saw the beginning of a fundamental shift in the direction of theoretical inquiry. The rise of structuralism, and later post-structuralism, in France laid the groundwork for new and expanded interest in semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Although these critical discourses did not directly concern film, they came to exert tremendous influence at the same time that film study first gained traction within the Anglo-American academy during the 1970s and 1980s. Film theory has since become an important sub-field in film and media studies, but it also remains a contentious subject with many detractors questioning its intellectual worth.

Insofar as film theory has become a primarily academic endeavor, it is often considered inordinately difficult, a foreign language of sorts full of impractical and esoteric abstractions. It is certainly the case that film theory is a specialized discourse with its own distinct jargon and idiosyncratic practices. Although these features sometimes function as a deterrent, this is not necessarily by design. Film theory's complexity is due instead to several different factors. First, theory develops as part of a broader history of ideas and many of the specific terms and debates within a particular discourse bear the intricate traces of both the conceptual and institutional contexts that shaped that process. Second, theory aims to understand what is not immediately self-evident. This requires formulating a critical framework capable of discerning what otherwise exceeds or escapes existing knowledge. Third, in terms of formulating these tools, film theory has been especially conspicuous in combining elements from different practices and disciplinary rubrics.

Complicating matters further is the fact that film theory has long been divided

between a descriptive or diagnostic practice devoted to evaluation and interpretation—similar to the scholarly writing done in the name of literary criticism or art history—and a more prescriptive or interventionist approach whereby theory provides the parameters necessary to found new forms of cinematic practice. In all of these different ways, however, theory deviates far from what many general readers may think of as theory in its most ordinary sense. In other words, film theory does not typically aim to provide universal principles or a comprehensive system of logically reasoned propositions that explain film or every aspect of its various implications. And for the most part even the most intricate and systematic examples of film theory cannot be reduced to standardized methods or hypotheses that are subject to empirical assessment. It is not that film theory is completely indifferent to these principles, but it is primarily a historically contingent discourse, one that is tied to a liberal humanist intellectual tradition rather than the applied sciences. As such, it comprises the ideas and arguments that have changed over time as film and its associated meanings have changed.

This may also account for the main reason that film theory remains so challenging. Both as a medium and as a practice, film is an incredibly complex and multi-faceted object of study. As a material object, film combines a transparent, synthetic plastic base coated with a light-sensitive chemical substance that, once exposed, serves as a representational record or artifact. As a late nineteenth-century invention, this new medium was a direct extension of photography, but also a byproduct of different endeavors including scientific research, developments in popular entertainment, new industrial production processes, and entrepreneurial finesse. As a practice, film predominantly refers to the moment of capture or recording of what appears before the camera. But this activity can also expand to encompass other aspects of the filmmaking process like optical printing or editing. As these practices developed into a successful commercial enterprise, film also became part of a complex industrial process. In the United States, it became the basis of a vertically integrated studio system whereby Hollywood controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of most films. This system, alternatively known as classical Hollywood cinema, simultaneously facilitated a unique set of visual and narrative conventions, privileging things like continuity.

By the end of the twentieth century, the meaning of film had become more complicated. In some ways, film has become more diffuse, merging with competing technologies like television, video games, and the internet. The proliferation of these technologies has certainly changed the ways in which films are circulated and consumed. Though traditional theatrical exhibition still plays an important role, films today are predominantly viewed in other contexts, either on home video formats like DVD and Blu-ray or on video-on-demand platforms and internet streaming services that are accessed through personal computing devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) or mobile phones. These changes have raised serious questions for film theory. The most prominent concern is that new digital technologies have fundamentally supplanted film as a medium—replacing its physical dimensions with immaterial binary codes. On one hand, film theory has adapted to these changes by simply expanding its purview to include a wider range of visual culture, one that encompasses, for example,

media, screen arts, and communication technologies in a much broader sense. On the other hand, film continues to have currency despite its apparent demise. For instance, it is still possible to hear things like, “I watched that film on TV” or “I filmed that with my phone.” This means that even though film and film theory may evoke anachronism, they continue to inform our understanding of moving images and still have much to contribute in the digital age.

Film’s complexity is not just the result of its changing material or discursive status, but part of its overall standing as a cultural object. Film has always been intertwined with the paradoxical implications of modern life or what is sometimes more generally termed modernity. When first invented, for instance, film was celebrated for its ability to capture and recreate movement. It was an exhilarating novelty embodying the energy and dynamism of modern technology. However, at the same time it was capable of evoking the disorientation and alienation that were equally prominent amidst rapid industrialization, urbanization, and new forms of socialization. In this respect, according to Maxim Gorky’s famous early account, film depicted a gray and dismal world deprived of all vitality. These conflicting associations set the tone for a medium that has regularly brought together opposing traits. For example, film is prized for its verisimilitude and its ability to document physical reality. It is taken to be a factual, trustworthy source of evidence, and a paragon of realist representation. On the other hand, film is characterized as an optical illusion and a celebrated source of entertainment best known for its fictional scenarios. In this regard, film is more closely associated with its ability to elicit pleasure and its affinity with fantasy and distortion. These different attributes have all prompted elaborate debates about film’s social and psychological effects. As part of these debates, theorists have been particularly critical of film’s power to reinforce cultural beliefs and ideologies. At the same time, many theorists have extolled film as an exemplary form of modern art. In this regard they have enthusiastically embraced film’s creative and political powers—though this is often the case only insofar as they are deemed capable of challenging the existing status quo.

In the long run, film’s complexity and contradictory implications would have its benefits. In a sense, they are responsible for the diverse range of issues taken up by film theorists that have required increasingly sophisticated forms of analysis and debate. In the short term, however, these challenges have also created periods of disorder and disagreement. This was most clearly the case in the first half of the twentieth century as film theory began to take its initial shape. During this time, film theory consisted of a loose-knit, eclectic mix of unorthodox thinkers. Although this group was devoted to establishing film’s merit, its distinctive aesthetic features, and its overall cultural legitimacy, there was very little overarching support or conceptual focus linking these early efforts together. Thus [Chapter 1](#), “Theory before theory,” details several different localized movements in the US and Europe, each of which featured its own distinct mix of film enthusiasts, filmmakers, and iconoclastic intellectuals. This was a period of innovation and exploration, fueled by pragmatic zeal and a growing appreciation for the new medium. As indispensable as this period was in laying the foundation for later work, it was also a time in which theory remained fragmentary and inchoate. It was only later, as subsequent critics and

scholars began moving in new and different directions, that these early pioneers became part of what was retroactively designated classical film theory.

For many years, the simple distinction between classical film theory and contemporary film theory was considered sufficient. The former referred to an earlier generation of theorists, most of whom are covered in [Chapter 1](#), and a period that had concluded around 1960. The latter referred to the tropes and methods that took precedence from that point on. Although this periodization is still used as a matter of convenience, it now raises as many questions as it answers. In an effort to address these concerns, this book takes a somewhat different approach to the later stages of film theory's development. While there is a strong emphasis on maintaining a chronological narrative throughout, [Chapter 2](#) is devoted to French theory and the years between 1949 and 1968, meaning there is some overlap with the period considered in the previous chapter. This approach allows André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer to be included with the earlier group of theorists even as they continued to write about cinema throughout this later period. It then draws separate attention to the contemporaneous emergence of structuralism, an integral precursor and catalyst for the contemporary variation of film theory that really only gained full momentum in the 1970s.

In addition to its overview of structuralism, [Chapter 2](#) details some of the more specific developments associated with semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxism that took place during this period. Although this requires something of a detour away from film in a strict sense, it is warranted considering the influence of Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser on later film theorists. In many regards, this group of French theorists established not only the terms and concepts that permeated film study for the next two decades, but its entire mindset. In this regard, these theorists also provided an important intellectual model, a new example of professionalized scholarship that combined methodological rigor with inter-disciplinary sophistication and anti-establishment verve.

The last two chapters cover the period more typically referred to as contemporary film theory. [Chapter 3](#), "Screen theory," focuses on the 1970s and 1980s, the period in which film study was incorporated into the Anglophone academy. It was at this time that film theory became a formally recognized and influential intellectual discourse. A large part of this success was tied to its connection with innovations undertaken by feminist, post-colonial, and queer theorists as well as affiliated developments in cultural studies and the critical analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality across popular culture. [Chapter 4](#), in turn, addresses how theory has changed in the period between 1996 and 2015 amidst a growing body of criticism directed at film theory and shifting interests within the academy. During this time, and partly as a result of its entrenchment as an academic discipline, film theory has shifted much of its focus, revisiting previous periods and questioning the problems or limitations that are now apparent in theory's earlier strategies. Although this chapter takes the title of "Post-theory," it does not argue that theory has ceased to exist. In the same way that film theory came into existence prior to it being named as such, it continues to evolve even as it has lost much of its rhetorical force as a self-sufficient organizing principle. To

put it another way, while film and media scholars may be less likely to invoke film theory as such, most of their research remains deeply informed by it and the most rigorous and sophisticated examples of scholarship in the field today necessarily maintain an ongoing dialogue with it and its legacy.

Film theory and this book are most likely to be encountered within a university setting as a required class or field of knowledge that must be learned as a matter of one's course of study. This book is an introductory text that aims to be of assistance in this context. Its primary objective is to make the complex history and diverse implications of film theory accessible to students, as well as general readers. It presents a predominantly chronological account of film theory and, true to the academic nature of the topic, highlights the key terms, debates, and figures that have shaped the field. Each chapter surveys a distinct historical period of development that coheres around certain common conceptual and practical concerns. In addition to the shared attitudes and priorities that are evident across the work of individual theorists, each stage bears traces of its surrounding social-historical circumstances. To this end, there is some effort to situate the development of film theory within a broader historical and intellectual context, and as part of contemporaneous debates about aesthetics, culture, and politics.

As much as this book aims to be accessible and practical in its general survey of film theory, there are also limitations to its approach. In addition to the partial overlap between [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#), there are inevitably moments that break the sequential order. In some cases, certain materials were not immediately available or were distorted by different historical contingencies. Our understanding of many theorists, for instance Kracauer, has changed significantly as additional material has become available to Anglophone readers. I consider all available materials whenever possible while also maintaining a semblance of continuity. In other cases, certain exceptions are made as a matter of other organizational parameters. For example, [Chapter 1](#) is divided into sub-sections that focus on different national contexts (e.g. France, Germany, Soviet Russia). Here each section maintains its own chronology even though there are several points of overlap between them. Another limitation here is that, even though there is an effort to be as comprehensive as possible, it should be clear to readers that this account focuses on film theory from an Anglo-American perspective, meaning that it is devoted largely to Western European and American theorists while neglecting the many others that fall outside of that tradition. These caveats simply mean that there are many instances in which additional reading or research will be necessary or at least highly recommended to fully appreciate the entire field of film theory.

In addition to its overview approach, there are several features designed to further orient newcomers, and to optimize the book's utility for all readers. Words printed in **bold** can be found in the book's first appendix, a glossary of theoretical terms. Proper names that are both italicized and in bold—for example, ***André Bazin***—can be found in the book's second appendix, a glossary of key theorists. These resources allow students to key in on the fundamental concepts and figures within film theory, and to quickly access concise definitions and basic descriptions. While the terms and highlighted theorists in the first half of the book are fairly straightforward, these

selections in the second half leave some room for debate. As film theory progresses, it is increasingly difficult to acknowledge every theorist or to clearly distinguish what should be counted as a major contribution. For this reason, some theorists are singled out for fuller discussion while others are merely mentioned in passing. These distinctions are made with some consideration for the theorist's overall contribution to the field and relevance within the immediate discussion, but, ultimately, such things are rather arbitrary and should not be taken to represent a definitive consensus.

Each chapter concludes with a series of brief discussion questions. These are designed to both reinforce the main issues covered in the chapter and encourage further consideration of certain problems or debates. These questions may also help instructors facilitate classroom discussion or coordinate supplemental reading assignments. These features aim to supplement the narrative account provided in the chapters that follow, and are a way to acknowledge that film theory extends beyond the basics covered here. This book is meant to impart readers with a narrative overview of film theory's main elements, but it should also be clear that this is an incredibly rich and expansive field that requires further consideration. Film theory offers great insight into the social, cultural, and intellectual history of the twentieth century, but fully grasping these complexities demands much more than can be provided here.

THEORY BEFORE THEORY, 1915–60

Film theory began to take shape over the first half of the twentieth century as an informal practice among individual writers, filmmakers, and enthusiasts dedicated to the new medium and its distinctive features. Although there was no formal framework or guidelines for these efforts, these early theorists did share several common aims. First and foremost, they participated in a broader effort to legitimize film. At this time, there was an overriding assumption that film did not warrant serious attention—that its popular appeal and its commercial and technological foundations necessarily meant it was antithetical to art or culture in its proper sense. To combat these general assumptions, early theorists made different claims on behalf of film’s artistic merits, typically by comparing or contrasting it with existing aesthetic practices such as theater. This also involved various attempts to identify film’s fundamental qualities—the formal and technical attributes that distinguished it as a medium and the practices to which it was attuned and that were necessary to advance its aesthetic potential.

The efforts of early theorists were often tied to the emergence of film connoisseurship and, by extension, the grassroots clubs, networks, and film-focused publications that were springing up in cosmopolitan hubs across the globe. These groups were characterized by their exuberance for the new medium. They recognized right away film’s affinity for modern life and the new artistic possibilities it presented. In expounding these merits, they helped to develop more sophisticated ways of expressing an appreciation for its distinctive features. In this regard, the emergence of film culture provided an important foundation for elevating cinema both aesthetically and intellectually. In France, in particular, film culture was tied to new venues for writing about, viewing, and discussing films. These venues eventually fostered new forms of filmmaking as select theorists sought additional ways to augment and further articulate cinema’s key characteristics. There was, as a result, a tendency for theory and practice to blend together throughout this period. Finally, this context served to establish a culture of lively debate and ongoing exchange, one in which writers became increasingly self-conscious of their ability to identify a canon of key films, filmmakers, distinctive performers, and genres.

At the same time that early theorists were linked in their effort to establish the new medium’s legitimacy and in their affiliation with a growing culture of film appreciation, there were also numerous challenges that impeded the coherence of early film theory. Some of these were tied to the fact that film was still a new invention and many of its formal practices were still evolving. Even with the Hollywood system in place by 1916, new technologies like sound and color stock required ongoing adjustments to its visual and narrative conventions. Another more pressing factor was

the social, political, and economic turmoil that persisted throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century. Major crises in Europe not only hindered the continent's nascent film industries—thus assuring Hollywood's ascent as the leading force in filmmaking—but in many instances disrupted the efforts of individual intellectuals, filmmakers, and the burgeoning grassroots networks that were still forming. Despite these challenges, the field's pioneering figures still managed to establish a body of writing and a series of key debates that became the foundation upon which later generations would develop theory into an important, academically rigorous, intellectual discourse.

EARLY AMERICAN THEORISTS AND THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

The publication of two books marks the official beginning of film theory. First, the poet **Vachel Lindsay** provided an inaugural attempt to cast film as an important aesthetic endeavor in his 1915 account, *The Art of the Moving Picture*. One year later, **Hugo Münsterberg** followed suit with *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, also arguing that film presented a unique aesthetic undertaking. In both cases, simply writing about film was a statement unto itself—an implicit attempt to elevate the medium and an argument that it warranted serious consideration despite assumptions to the contrary. The two authors shared several additional similarities. Both, for instance, used their reputations in other fields to confer credibility on the fledgling medium. Both identified key formal characteristics and began the work of establishing the distinct aesthetic merits of these attributes. As part of this particular task, both considered the relationship between film and theater, drawing attention to the ways that film surpassed its predecessor. While Lindsay and Münsterberg anticipate the main developments of early film theory, they are most noteworthy for their idiosyncrasies in attempting to navigate this uncharted territory.

For most of his career, Vachel Lindsay was best known as an American poet who enjoyed fleeting success in the 1910s and early 1920s. He was also a lifelong aesthete with a rather unconventional sense of purpose. For instance, after briefly attending art schools in Chicago and New York, Lindsay built his reputation by embarking on several “tramping” expeditions, crisscrossing the country on foot and by train attempting to barter his poems in exchange for room and board. With these expeditions, Lindsay forged a romanticized bond with both the common folk and with the physical landscape of America. He wanted to use these experiences to continue in the tradition of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he was also adamant about cultivating a new and modern American aesthetic. Specifically, he envisioned a style that was more readily accessible to all, and that promised spiritual renewal as part of a utopian vision of the future.

Lindsay's unusual beliefs about art and society indicate an ambivalence; one that was further complicated by his vacillation between populist undercurrents and a more modern sensibility. By 1914 Lindsay had published his two most famous poems, “General William Booth Enters into Heaven” and “The Congo,” in *Poetry* magazine.

In short order, Lindsay became one of the country's most visible poets both performing on a nationwide circuit and participating in Progressive Era programs such as the Chautauqua education movement. While he had a distinctive performance style that helped establish him among middle-class audiences, his peers—academics and poets of the period—mainly dismissed his work as sentimental and insipid. Lindsay nevertheless incorporated modern elements both in content and form. He authored several odes celebrating Hollywood starlets such as Mary Pickford, Mae Marsh, and Blanche Sweet, and he introduced singing, chanting, and sound effects into his recitation. "The Congo," for instance, incorporated the syncopated rhythms of ragtime, the spontaneity of jazz, and racist caricatures drawn from blackface minstrelsy, all as part of Lindsay's effort to animate his poetry with the sounds of modern American life.

Such ploys were part of a broader synthesis that Lindsay termed "Higher Vaudeville." In other words, he was interested in producing an elevated version of the popular variety theater that appealed to the American masses. This aesthetic aim was also evident in another term he favored. "I am an adventurer in hieroglyphics," Lindsay once claimed. He would soon use the same term to describe motion pictures, adding further that with the "cartoons of [Ding] Darling, the advertisements in the back of the magazines and on the bill-boards and in the street-cars, the acres of photographs in the Sunday newspapers," America was growing "more hieroglyphic everyday" (*Art of the Moving Picture* 14). In moving pictures, he found the ideal extension of his personal aesthetic, the most dynamic and compelling iteration of this new and growing field of hieroglyphic arts. The main objective of *The Art of the Moving Picture* was indeed to establish the virtues of this new endeavor, and to suggest that it take a leading role in shaping modern American life.

Though Lindsay's discussion of film is highly impressionistic, he does propose three specific types of films that highlight the medium's specific qualities: the action film, the intimate film, and films of splendor. For each of these three categories he designates a corollary aesthetic distinction. The action film is described as sculpture-in-motion, the intimate film as painting-in-motion, and the splendor film as architecture-in-motion. These designations were not simply a matter of genre, but rather a way to foreground the medium's specific strengths and the subject matter to which it is most attuned. For example, the action film is closely linked to the chase sequence, a formula based on editing techniques such as cross-cutting and other innovations associated with the groundbreaking work of D.W. Griffith. This type of editing endowed cinema with dynamism—a rhythmic quality, an aptitude for speed, movement, and acceleration—that appealed to modern American society. This was considered sculptural in the sense that action emphasized the constituent features of the medium—its ability to capture and manipulate spatial and temporal relations. Just as the sculptor is trained to accentuate the materiality of a given medium, Lindsay believed that film should draw into relief that which "can be done in no medium but the moving picture itself" (*Art of the Moving Picture* 72).

While Lindsay emphasized the temporal dimension that film added to traditional spatial or plastic arts, he was also careful to distinguish it from time-based practices such as poetry, music, and especially theater. The reason for this was that film had