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What's a "good" film? A few answers to an impossible question

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Introduction

Let's try to explain the paradox in the title of this paper. How can you provide answers to an "impossible" question?

What is a "good" movie? Intuitively, it is a question that does not allow clear and exhaustive answers, since the concept of "beauty" or "worth" is intrinsically linked to the perception and judgment of the viewer, therefore a totally subjective idea. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder", goes an English proverb, so what is "beautiful" for a person may not be beautiful at all for someone else. "At the cinema, the film is always the same. It's you who's different': this writing appears at the entrance to the Museo Interattivo del Cinema in Milan, with the corollary that there can be as many opinions about the same film as there are spectators. So, what's the point of asking what a "good" movie is?

" I loved this movie. It's really good". - "I didn't like it at all. It's a terrible movie."

These two extreme judgments made by different people regarding the same film deserve to be examined more closely, as they refer to very different factors.

In *Part 1* of this paper we shall start from the degrees of "pleasure" that a film can offer as markers of the *personal reactions* it stimulates in a single viewer - we will therefore focus on the individual "taste". But if "tastes cannot be discussed", as one might immediately say, it is interesting to explore what lies beneath and behind the very ambiguous label of "taste": thus we will discover. on the one hand, the "*individual* baggage" of knowledge, competences, beliefs, values, motivations with which each viewer approaches the viewing experience, and, on the other hand, the contexts and situations in which this experience takes place, i.e. its *social* character. This will lead us to consider the *factors* that affect the personal approach to a movie (and its evaluation): the *motivations* behind the choice of a certain movie, the *use* that each viewer makes of the information conveyed by the film, and the corresponding *expectations* that are generated. We shall see how the same movie can be "enjoyed" in different ways by different viewers.

In *Part 2* we will come back to the "formula" of "a good film". A "good" film refers to *qualities* possessed (or not) by the film, qualities that can be described by trying to identify judgment *criteria*, for example the originality of the story, the coherence of the narrative, the ability to excite or make people reflect. Criteria of this type can be used to *argue* the value of a film, that is, to compare and discuss with "normative" tools the different judgments that can be given on the same film: it is clearly

not a question of formulating an objective and definitive judgment, but rather to enrich the analysis of a film with a discussion which, even if not intended to produce a unanimity of views, can prove very fruitful for the elements it allows to highlight.

Finally, in *Part 3* we will explore which *mental mechanisms* lead us to like or dislike a movie, starting from the fact that, as spectators, we tend to attribute some (more or less explicit and conscious) *intentions* to the images and sounds (and therefore, to the filmmaker). Movies can be vastly different as to the meanings and emotions they seem to convey, and each viewer plays an active role in interpreting the ways in which cinema, through its "language" (direct or indirect, like analogies and metaphors) stimulates her/his mind, heart and, ultimately, full body.

These three perspectives (the *individual differences* found in spectators, the *criteria* for film analysis and the *mental mechanisms* through which viewers attribute a certain value to images and sounds) are not in antithesis to each other, and can indeed interact in a positive way, allowing us to enrich our viewing experiences with a variety of elements which, although not allowing us to give a univocal and universally acceptable answer to the "impossible" question *"What is a "good" film?*, will offer much food for thought to *understand* the factors at play - as well as enabling us to *argue* our opinions, beyond superficial statements about what we liked or disliked, with a greater degree of objectivity and awareness.

"We need to know how to appreciate what we don't like" wrote French composer Gabriel Fauré (Note 1), and this statement can guide us along the path we are about to follow: if it is important to understand *why* we like something, it is even more productive to make the effort to understand what doesn't meet our taste - because appreciating a film, beyond our most instinctive and superficial reactions, enriches our experience as spectators, as citizens and as human beings.

"Subjecting the taste for cinema to scientific-objective criteria or transforming criticism into irrefutable science is like looking for the chemical formula of love or the sex of angels: impossible and not necessarily desirable" (Note 2)

In a word: try to *understand* without trying to *explain* (or, worse, to give a definitive judgment ...).

Part 1: What's hidden within individual "tastes"?

1. The "personal baggage" of each spectator and individual expectations

Each viewer approaches every life experience, including the experience of watching a film, with a "personal baggage" made up, on the one hand, of knowledge, experiences, skills, and on the other, of beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations. At the cinema, this personal baggage is made up of

- *knowledge*: both what is already known about the individual film (for example, from seeing advertisements or trailers or from reading or listening to news or reviews), and what is known about cinema in general (for example, who the director is, who the actors/actresses are, which "genre" the film seems to belong to, which other films it can refer ...);

- *skills*: the degree of one's critical abilities, the extent to which one is able to understand various aspects of the film "text" (for example, knowing how to interpret certain choices made in the film regarding camera movements, editing, the use of colour or music...);

- *beliefs, attitudes, values*: what you think of and how you judge a film (for example, based on the opinion you have of the director's political positions, the themes covered, the influence the film can have on viewers...);

- *motivations*: the needs that the film can satisfy, the gratifications it can offer, and ultimately the reasons why a certain film is chosen, and therefore the different uses that can be made of it.

This set of factors influences the way in which one approaches watching, determining the expectations regarding a film. Expectations are a crucial element, as they create the "ground" on the basis of which, at the beginning, during but above all at the end of the viewing experience, one will judge the meaning and value of the film for oneself: how much did the film satisfy my (cognitive and affective) needs? Do I feel gratified or frustrated? Did the film respond to the reasons why I chose it and the use I intended to make of it? These are questions that most of the time spectators do not consciously ask themselves (how many spectators enter a multiplex without a clear idea of which film they will choose?), but which deeply affect the viewing experience, and which often resurface in the comments and discussions after the viewing: I expected... and instead ... It left me indifferent ... It's exactly what you can expect from this director ... And on the basis of the same expectations one can explain the reactions of different spectators to the same film.

Regarding *Lions for Lambs* (whose title was intended as a metaphor to polemically describe the concept of heroic soldiers under the orders of inept commanders) one can hear things like: *It's a film with Tom Cruise ... It's a Robert Redford film ... It's a good war film ... It's a film belonging to t he typical American "liberal" tradition ... It's another superb performance by Meryl Streep ... It moved me ... It made me reflect on the eternal question of war ...* Clearly, who makes these statements shows that he/she possesses (or not) certain knowledge and skills, that he/she evaluates (positively or not) the values expressed by the film, that he/she feels gratified (or not) by the use that he/she has been able to make of the film: these are clearly statements that refer to the expectations and "personal baggage" of each individual spectator.

Lions for lambs (Robert Redford, USA 2007)

We will analyse the factors that can lead a spectator to choose, interpret and appreciate a certain film in Part 2 of this paper. But first it is necessary to complete our introduction to individual expectations with a necessary reminder of the social aspects of the experience of watching a film.

2. The social aspect: the situations and contexts of vision

Despite the proliferation of streaming platforms, which allow a "home" viewing of films, the experience of watching a film in a theatre remains the experience most authentically close to the spirit with which cinema was born and developed throughout its history. Watching a film in a theatre was for a long time the only way to enjoy this means of communication, which therefore immediately took the form of an experience that was not only individual but also social: sharing the vision of a film with other spectators still constitutes an important factor, which influences both our expectations, the way in which we perceive and interpret what we see and hear, and our final judgment on the film. The audience of a cinema reacts to the vision not only as the sum of the

reactions of all the individual spectators, but also as a "social body" which manifests its cognitive and, above all, emotional responses in various ways: for example, with a collective laughter in the face of a comic episode, with a gasp in the face of a dramatic turning point in the story, and even with an almost "unnatural" silence in the face of moments of suspense ... Hearing others laugh (or cry!), comment or hold their breath leads us to feel the same sensations or to accentuate what we already feel. When the Lumière brothers presented one of their first films to a paying public, *The arrival of a train at La Ciotat station*, spectators were terrified by the approach of the train on the screen, and some even tried to save themselves ... such was the impact of the new visual medium on a still "virgin" audience. Over time, spectators have become accustomed to all sorts of effects, but when Hitchcock showed the brutal murder of the protagonist in the famous shower scene in *Psycho*, spectators jumped in their seats with terrified screams, which amplified the chilling sounds of the sequence and the corresponding soundtrack by Bernard Herrmann - a classic example of fusion between the audiovisual input provided by the screen and the output of the community of spectators who reacted almost "in unison" in the face of these extraordinary stimuli. The reactions of those sitting next to us are therefore fundamental because they influence our own reactions.

L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat/*The arrival of a train at La Ciotat station* (Lumière Brothers, France 1896)

Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1960)

We also know how personal tastes themselves are conditioned by the opinions of people close to us: for example, we can tend to love a film that our partner liked, and comparison and discussion with others, particularly with people we respect, can enlighten us on the value of a certain film, or can even make us change our mind. In short, individual tastes are also formed through sharing experiences with others. At the same time, these personal tastes may not coincide with the opinions of the groups we are part of: we have all noticed a gap between the ideas that we freely express in groups of friends, and those that are expected of us, for example, by our teachers or other more or less "institutional" figures. More generally, however, personal tastes are a strong factor of cohesion within a group: we can thus feel that we belong to a certain group because we love a certain type of film (but also the opposite: we love a certain type of film because we belong to a certain group ...).

Thus the comparison with others on the same film can give us the measure of personal differences and, therefore, of the relativity of judgments and opinions. It is always interesting and instructive to understand why a certain film is liked or not, what arguments are used to defend one's opinion, and what reactions it provoked in different spectators. If people tell us that a certain film made them think, or moved them, or made them happy, and that therefore for them it is "a good film", when for us the same film was simply boring to death, we must probably give in to the idea that the film/spectator relationship can be expressed in many different ways. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that, if we did not like a film, we have a tendency to attribute the reason for this "failure" to the film itself (and not to our very personal cultural and psychological baggage): the theory of *causal attributions* explains how human beings tend to attribute the reason for their own "failure" to external causes rather than to themselves (and, conversely, to attribute the reason for their own success to themselves)(Note 3). But the opposite can also happen: when faced with a film that was not to our liking, we can perhaps attribute some positive aspects to it just to justify our experience (i.e. to reduce

the negative feeling of having made a wrong choice or of having wasted our time and money - thus protecting, among other things, our self-esteem).

Even the situation in which we find ourselves when we decide to see a film influences our choices in this regard: it is no coincidence that sites, blogs, chats and podcasts on the Internet are full of advice and suggestions for choosing a film depending, for example, on the season, the time of day, the people with whom we decide to watch the film, the particular occasion we are experiencing, and a thousand other contextual factors: thus "labels" *(tags)* are associated with each film which identify the "right" film for a romantic evening, for a friendly meeting, for a birthday party ... and the most "suitable" film to be seen alone, as a couple, with a group of friends, together with children ... when you are tired, happy, sad, anxious ... This "tagging" system leads to the creation of lists of films for every occasion: thus we have "the 10 films to see at Christmas", "the 20 films not to be missed during the pandemic lockdown", "the 15 best films to see with your dog" ... and so on. The information collected by streaming platforms about our choices is then processed by special algorithms that suggest further films to see, in the presumption that if you loved a "type X" film you will also probably enjoy a "type Y" film ... Thus the *social* aspect of the viewing experience remains crucial, not just when "going to the cinema" (most spectators go to the cinema with friends or relatives), but also for the private home viewing of movies rented or bought on a streaming platform.

Top 20 Movies That Will Make You Cry - from YouTube

Top 10 Horror Movies 2024 You Should Never Watch Alone - from YouTube

The contextual factors that make us like (or not) a film can also change over time: it is not uncommon to discover that a film that we loved at the time turns out to be boring or insignificant a few years later (or the opposite). In this case, we can also fall into the temptation to believe that it is the film that has changed, and not us. Certainly the enormous availability of audiovisual products that characterizes our multimedia/digital societies leads us to "experience" new things and, over time, this influences the formation and change of our tastes - which are thus constantly evolving. This evolution is accelerated by rapid technological (and cultural) progress, to the point that if once, and until a few decades ago, generations of spectators changed every twenty-five years, today five years, and perhaps less, are enough to identify new trends, new values, new "tastes".

3. The factors that influence the personal approach to a film (and its evaluation)

We return to what was already mentioned in Section 1, i.e. the *motivations* that drive a person to choose a certain film, the *use* that this person can actually make of the audiovisual information transmitted by the film, and the generation of corresponding *expectations*. Individual approaches to a single film, and to cinema as an experience as a whole, are of many types, which we summarize here, with two important preliminary considerations: that these approaches are not necessarily conscious, and that each spectator can deploy more than one approach simultaneously (Note 4).

The *avoidance of boredom*, the *need for escape*: it is perhaps the most generic approach, and undoubtedly corresponds to a common need. Closely related is *sensation seeking*, which allows people, through access to emotions, to forget their daily worries by resorting to easily available media (not only and perhaps not primarily cinema, but also television and, increasingly, the use of the Internet), and even, beyond this, to a*void negative feelings* about themselves by accessing media

content that allows for more positive personal experiences. Sensation seeking may involve the seeking of excitement (e.g. through violent or erotic or horror films), which, however, may be experienced in different ways and at different levels by the same person over time: this means that each individual tries to reach her/his own optimal level of arousal. Furthermore, the negative feelings generated by, for example, a horror or suspense film, can ultimately lead to positive emotions once the frightening events give way to a happy ending. Avoiding boredom and seeking emotional stimulation can be combined with one or more of the other approaches discussed below.

Expecting personal enrichment or change: catharsis, or the experience of negative sensations, refers to the fact that experiencing pain and suffering through the mediation of cinematic characters and events, for example in drama and melodrama, can also provide feelings of relief by putting the viewer in a position to better deal with their problems and difficulties.

Concentrating on the plot, on the events, on the characters: it is perhaps the most immediate level of enjoyment of the "film" product, which in turn cinema has always exploited to "hook" its spectators and lead them, through appropriate narrative twists and turns, towards an expected (or unexpected) ending.

Searching for information: the need to find information and process it, thus activating reflection and discussion, can be related to both an emotional use (such as the search for sensations) and a cognitive use (such as the avoidance of boredom), and can lead to choosing film genres such as documentaries, but also biopics and films that mix reality and fiction (docufiction). The information provided by the film can then be used in many different ways, for example by spectators who are particularly politically, socially and culturally engaged.

"Squeezing" possible meanings from the film, giving new interpretations: beyond the surface of the plot, spectators can ask themselves how to interpret what they see and hear, what messages the film can or wants to convey - to the extreme of "making" the film say something which in reality could be the spectators' projection of their personal beliefs, attitudes, values.

"Capturing" the world that revolves around the film and sharing it with others: it can be an extension of the previous approach. By pushing your role as an active spectator (and not simply a passive consumer) even further, it is possible to use all the elements of the film (from the plot to the characters, from the sets to the soundtrack, up to the technical and stylistic choices) to manipulate them, creating new configurations of these elements, "playing" with them, also to produce new content, which can perhaps be shared online with others. The websites of fans of a certain film, actor, director, saga or film genre are full not only of personal judgments and opinions, but also of new multimedia content created by exploiting the source materials provided by the original films.

Giving vent to one's cinephilia: this is related to the previous approach, but can take on different connotations. Depending on one's knowledge and skills, a spectator can analyze a film for various purposes, for example, to provide a more or less motivated critical judgment (perhaps looking for factors such as originality or authenticity), to connect the film to other previous films or to other films by the same director, to insert it into a trend, a school of thought, or even to place the film within the history of cinema and its evolutions.

Appreciating the film from an aesthetic point of view: it can be part of the previous approach, but in this case the artistic use of films is based on focusing, in particular, on the specific elements of film language (such as mise-en-scène, camera movements, editing, the use of colour or sound) that produce the final result.

Using the film experience for its social value: as we have already seen, the experience of shared viewing promotes a sense of affiliation, which satisfies the need to relate to others, to share experiences and, in general, offers opportunities for interpersonal experiences, such as watching films with friends, discussing them and being part of social networks. Note that the reason for affiliation does not only refer to contacts with other people, but also with the characters in a film, thus raising important questions such as identification with the characters (and the actresses/actors who play them).

The following examples tend to highlight how a spectator can be motivated by multiple approaches at the same time, thus using the input provided by a film for multiple uses, even different ones. And of course, as we have already pointed out, the same film can be exploited by different viewers in very different ways.

4. Examples of the multiple levels of "reading" the same film

Rear window (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1954)

A film like *Rear window* can be chosen and used, first of all, to satisfy the search for sensations (such as suspense) usually guaranteed by the thriller genre. In this sense the spectator can essentially concentrate on the plot, the characters, the twists and turns of the plot, thus following that itinerary of emotional involvement that a master like Hitchcock knew how to admirably manipulate. But the film can also satisfy the expectations of those who know they can count on a Hitchcock film (having previously seen others) to obtain the satisfaction "guaranteed" by the name; in the same direction, the film can attract for the performance of some famous Hollywood "stars" such as James Stewart and Grace Kelly. Going a little deeper, a spectator who is passionate about thrillers can connect this particular film to others by the same director or the same genre, more or less consciously establishing connections with his previous viewing experiences. Still other viewers may focus on the stylistic and formal aspects of the film, paying particular attention to the masterful ways in which, for example, the camera moves from inside the apartment in which the protagonist is confined to the outside, in a circular motion that encompasses all the other apartments that overlook the courtyard. Finally, someone could dwell on the symbolic value of the gaze that the protagonist, even through a telephoto lens, brings to his neighbours, with the spectator's involvement in this "voyeuristic" activity... to the point of making even more abstract considerations on the role that the "gaze" of a character (and/or of the camera and/or of the spectator) plays in the production and enjoyment of a film, even throughout the history of cinema. As we can see, it is possible to use the same film for the most diverse uses, from the most superficial to the most "theoretical" and abstract ones, by audiences who include, at one extreme, spectators interested only or mainly in enjoying a "good" suspense film, and at the other extreme, spectators who can and want to be critically involved, as inveterate cinephiles, in what the film can offer.

Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1979)

Those who love war films can definitely pick up a film like *Apocalypse Now* and enjoy the spectacle associated with this genre of film - and they won't be disappointed. But other expectations could be linked to the name of the director, whose previous films a spectator may have appreciated (such as *The Godfather* and T*he Godfather - Part II)* as well as subsequent ones, even belonging to different genres (such as, among others, *Cotton Club, Peggy Sue Got Married* or *Bram Stoker's Dracula)*. The performers can also be a source of attraction (for fans of Marlon Brando in particular, here in one of his most intense performances). Since it is a film set during the Vietnam War, some viewers might connect it with other films on the same topic from the history of cinema (also rbelonging to very different genres, from *Green Berets* with John Wayne to *M.A.S.H.* by Robert Altman, from *Coming Home* by Hal Ashby to *Platoon* and *Born on the 4th of July* by Oliver Stone to *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick); those interested in the historical and political implications of this war could use this film to reflect on the trauma it caused on American society. Some viewers may remember that the film is inspired by a story *(Heart of Darkness)* by Joseph Conrad; others, digging even deeper, could consider the highly symbolic value of the story, which presents itself as a reflection on the madness of war in general (and on the related madness of drugs, violence, sex), considering the journey along the river as an allegory of a descent into the underworld of the human mind. But the film lends itself equally well to being analysed and appreciated for its aesthetic and formal values (for example, Vittorio Storaro's photography, with the unforgettable arrival of the helicopters to the tune of Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Walkyries*). The most informed cinephiles might remember the enormous problems (financial, psychological, and even climatic) faced by Coppola during the making of the film, or the various documentaries dedicated to it, or the various versions prepared by the director over the years, as well as the awards won (from the Oscars to the Golden Palm in Cannes).

2001: A space odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, GB 1968)

Even a complex and multifaceted film like *2001: A Space Odyssey* can be enjoyed in very different ways depending on the audience. As a science fiction film, it is certainly a compelling and intriguing film, and can therefore be fully appreciated by those who love this film genre. But the film also revolutionized the genre from a formal-stylistic point of view, with a very innovative use, among other things, of editing, special effects and the soundtrack. Those who pay attention to these types of factors will not easily forget the now iconic sequence in which a bone, thrown into the air by an ape monkey in the prologue, almost magically transforms into a spaceship sailing in space; or the long sequence towards the end of the film, in which a dizzying intertwining of optical effects (in an era when computer graphics was still in its infancy) accompanies the protagonist beyond the limits of space and time; or again, the extraordinary "cosmic ballet" in which the space station seems to dance to the tune of Strauss' The *Blue Danube* waltz ... And viewers more informed about the evolution of cinematographic formats will be able to appreciate the power of cinema viewing with the large 70 mm *Superpanavision* format, which was very innovative at the time. But even those who would like to concentrate on the plot, on the events, on the characters are soon encouraged to ask themselves questions in the face of a succession of situations which, from the initial prologue set in a pre-human era, with a leap of four million years moves to a future time (2001, then still far away from the year the film was made, 1968), to end in an epilogue in which the astronaut who survived the revolt of the on-board computer finds himself in an eighteenth-century room, now aged ... to finally transform, by way of rebirth, into a fetus floating above the image of the Earth ... It is inevitable, therefore, at least for many spectators, to go from simply following the events of the plot to wondering what meanings can be conveyed by this "odyssey", which seems to concentrate in itself the thousand questions that man asks himself regarding life, Time, Space and his destiny in the Universe: the film, in short, lends itself very well to "squeezing" the meanings that the director wanted to convey in a symbolic or metaphorical way. Certainly the viewer who has further information on the film will be able to better practice this attribution of meanings and values: for example, it is not secondary to know that the film is very freely inspired by some stories by a famous science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke; and even the "cinephile" knowledge of the world of Kubrick and his films (before and after *2001*) can be enlightening in appreciating the stylistic choices of this film, which, rather than the narration of events, solicits the audience with an eminently visual representation, all played on the power of images. And finally, the most informed spectator will be able to reflect on the words of Kubrick himself, which seem to well summarize the different approaches that viewers can adopt towards the same film: "Everyone is free to speculate as they like on the philosophical and allegorical meaning of the film. I have tried to represent a visual experience, which bypasses understanding to penetrate with its emotional content directly into the unconscious." (Note 5)

Part 2: Some criteria for film evaluation

1. The range of possible criteria, a "bridge" between objective and subjective

After discussing individual "tastes" and what can be understood by the rather ambiguous and multifaceted label of "taste," let us now reflect on a series of criteria that can be used to evaluate a film and thus justify the claim that it is a "good" film. Once again, as we have made clear in the introduction to this paper, these cannot be criteria that objectively define the value of a film once and for all, but rather elements that can be used to understand why a film can be judged in a certain way, without giving it an absolute and definitive evaluation. In other words, the criteria we will discuss below are an attempt to justify our evaluative choices by using elements that act as a "bridge" between impossible objectivity ("It's a beautiful film") and the most idiosyncratic subjectivity ("I really liked it").

2. The judgment of "critics" and 'rankings' or "hall of fame"

One of the most easily usable criteria for evaluating a film is to consider (and accept) the opinions provided by film critics. This criterion immediately proves to be somewhat problematic, first of all because of the difficulty of defining who, today, can be considered a "critic" and on the basis of which factors. If once upon a time film criticism used to be the almost exclusive preserve of professional "experts," such as journalists who regularly published reviews in newspapers and magazines, today, with the explosion of forms of communication in the digital and Internet age, the category of "critics" has expanded dramatically to include a wide and diverse range of people who are involved in cinema at various levels. For example,

- "professional" critics, who are often still journalists specializing in the field and who publish their reviews in newspapers and magazines (in print and/or digital format);

- "academics," university professors in various fields (not only "cinema" in the strict sense, but also communication, media, visual arts, etc.);

- specific institutions such as national or local film libraries;

- members of specialized websites, such as the International Movie Database (IMDb), who have the opportunity to express opinions and ratings;

- and the myriad of websites, blogs, chats, clubs, and so on, which, perhaps born as relatively "private" places, often turn into virtual spaces for sharing more or less reasoned opinions or even simply personal "likes" and "tastes," sometimes dedicated specifically to a film genre, a television series, a saga such as *Star Wars,* or even a single film that has become a "cult classic" for a more or less restricted or extended circle of enthusiasts and fans.

It is clear that, in the sea of information on the net, these different types of "critics" play very different roles and, above all, base their assessments on a huge and undefined range of "criteria," which are most often not explicitly stated or are taken for granted. It is therefore even more important, as we are doing, to state as precisely and clearly as possible what the possible criteria underlying the judgments on a film consist of - thus restoring not only the reliability of "critics" but also the role they can play and the value of the many evaluations circulating in the expanding universe of the web.

Perhaps the most obvious and intriguing product of the presence of so many diverse "critical instances" are the 'rankings' that are constantly being compiled, or the "hall of fame" or, in more

technical terms, the *palmarès*: many of the categories of critics we have mentioned engage in the production, for example, of the '10 best films of the year', the '100 most loved films of all time', and so on. We thus find 'professional' rankings compiled by magazine critics (often competing with each other), university professors, or institutions, but also "amateur" rankings compiled by people who do not necessarily have an economic or other interest, such as magazine readers, website users, members of a virtual community, or even simply "Internet users" who enjoy sharing their tastes online (not to mention the impact that *influencers* can have in this sector as well). In addition to all these "hall of fame" lists, there are also more "quantitative" rankings, based, for example, on the number of awards received (the Oscars, the Palmes d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, the Lions at the Venice Film Festival, the Bears at the Berlin Film Festival, or the Pardi at the Locarno Film Festival...), or on film market figures (box office takings, streaming platform earnings, DVD or Blu-Ray sales, etc.), and finally on online presence data (number of films downloaded, trailer views, web pages dedicated to a film, quotes and mentions, etc.).

Needless to say, the opinions and assessments of what constitutes a "good" film from such numerous and diverse sources are highly uncertain, even divergent, and often influenced by biased considerations, if not affected by more or less obvious or hidden interests. In this regard, it is very significant to compare two of the best-known and most "quoted" rankings available online, but which are very different from each other: the aforementioned *International Movie Database (IMDb)* and *Sight and Sound* magazine published by the British Film Institute.

The *IMDb* ranking (here is the 2025 ranking) is based on the choices made by users registered on the site (tens of millions) in response to surveys: it is therefore a very heterogeneous audience of 'critics', not better identified, but overall "unprofessional." Among the rankings compiled by *Sight and Sound,* however, the one published every ten years since 1952 ("The 100 Greatest Films of All Time") stands out. It is based on the choices of professionals in the sector and divided into two sub-rankings: on the one hand, critics, programmers, archivists, and academics, and on the other, directors and filmmakers (in the latest survey in 2022, 1,639 and 480 people respectively). If we take 2022 as the reference year, the top ten in the IMDb ranking were:

1. The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, USA 1994)

2. The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1972)
3. The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, GB-USA 2008)
4. The Godfather Part II (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1974)
5. Twelve angry men (Sidney Lumet, USA 1957)
6. Schindler's list (Steven Spielberg, USA 1993)
7. The Lord of the Rings - The return of the king (Peter Jackson, New Zealand-USA 2003)
8. Pulp fiction (Quentin Tarantino, USA 1994)
9. The Lord of the Rings - The Fellowship of the Ring (Peter Jackson, New Zealand-USA 2001)
10. Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo (Sergio Leone, Italy 1966)

The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, USA 1994)

What is perhaps most striking is the "age" of these films: in 2022, seven out of ten were 28 years old or older, with two films produced in 1957 and 1966. Considering the huge commercial success of films released in the previous 30 years, it is surprising that users of the site 'remember' much older films and thus demonstrate a kind of surprising 'historical memory'. The other striking fact is probably the ability of these seven films not only to arouse emotions, but also to provide food for ethical thought—these are films that, in different ways, also offer "material for reflection," whether directly on issues related to justice (as in *The Shawshank Redemption* or *Schindler's List*) or more broadly on themes that raise moral questions (such as the two *Godfather* films). But even the most recent and rather adventurous films (such as *The Lord of the Rings* saga and *The Dark Knight*) are not exempt from questions concerning good, evil, and the struggle to pursue ideals. On the contrary, what is striking is the absence of films that are more directly 'escapist' and genres often considered 'lighter', such as comedies or comic films.

Let us now consider the choices made, again in 2022, by the critics interviewed by *Sight and Sound*:

1. Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Chantal Akerman, Belgium-France 1975)
2. Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1958)
3. Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, USA 1941)
4. Tokyo Story (Ozu Yasujiro, Japan 1953)
5. In the mood for love (Wong Kar Wai, Hong Kong-France 2000)
6. 2001: A space odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, UK-USA 1968)
7. Beau travail (Claire Denis, France 1998)
8. Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, USA 2001)
9. Man with a movie camera (Dziga Vertov, USSR 1929)
10. Singin' in the rain (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, USA 1952)

Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

In this case, six out of ten are films that appeared more or less in the first six decades of the 20th century - films that we could label as widely recognized "classics," and even "pillars" of film history. It is clear that choosing these films requires a deep knowledge of the sector and of how to judge films that are very different from each other as "good" (which implies the presence of diverse criteria for judgment). But even other more recent films (such as *In the Mood for Love* or *Mulholland Drive)* have already established their value, especially in the eyes of viewers who are somewhat "competent." On the other hand, the presence of two more "experimental" and certainly not "popular" films in the strict sense, such as J*eanne Dielman* and *Beau travail*, is surprising, especially since they are also quite distant from the present day (1975 and 1998). In this case too, however, these are films that, albeit for different reasons, may have had a particular impact on those involved in cinema in a more professional capacity. As with the *IMDb* user ranking, the critics surveyed by *Sight and Sound* certainly did not choose "escapist" films, but rather films that, in one way or another, stand out for the "commitment" of their respective directors, especially in terms of style and aesthetics. To be fair, it should be noted that this ranking (and, in particular, the choice of Number 1) has been widely criticized, highlighting the subjectivity of the whole operation and questioning its very meaning:

"In the rush to classify cinema, lists of the greatest films of all time have been created, which perhaps say much more about the society that compiles them than about cinema itself." (Note 6)

The divergence between the two rankings examined is also striking: *IMDb* users and *Sight and Sound* critics chose totally different top ten films. This implies the use of diverse and, in part, alternative criteria of "quality" (such as those we will discuss in the following sections). However, beyond these macroscopic differences, it is interesting to note that in both cases the films chosen are, to some extent, rich in elements that lend themselves to reflection and discussion, due to the themes they deal with and/or the stylistic and aesthetic choices that characterize them.

3. Commercial success

This criterion stands somewhat apart from the others, as it is represented by measurable elements: while the critical success of a film, as noted in the previous section, can refer to the criticism of journalists, academics, and so on, commercial success refers to box office takings, i.e. the number of tickets sold in cinemas (with their equivalents in television or streaming services, such as the number of viewers tuned in to a channel, the number of views or videos downloaded from the Internet). The fact that we are talking about measurable factors obviously does not make this criterion objective in itself: the number of viewers or users does not automatically correspond to a positive evaluation of a certain film. First of all, we do not know how many viewers consciously and deliberately chose a certain show: it could be a convenient choice, dictated by a thousand different reasons (the proximity of a cinema, the desire to spend an evening with friends anyway, a last-minute choice made before entering one of the multiplex theatres, the desire to do something different on a Saturday night...); or a choice influenced by others (the desire to please one's partner, children, friends, etc.); or even a somewhat 'obligatory' choice (seeing a certain film that everyone is talking about, for example, to respect the choices of one's peer group, to avoid feeling 'excluded', to appear 'trendy" or "cool" in front of others or even in front of oneself...). In the case of purchased DVDs/Blu-Rays, we do not know how many are "pirated," nor the extent of their circulation (copies can be made to give to friends, etc.); the same applies to streaming services with illegally "downloaded" copies. And how many users of television channels or streaming services may have stopped watching before the end or, conversely, watched the same film one or more times?

But the number of "paying" viewers does not necessarily equate to positive reviews for another, perhaps even more crucial reason: we do not know how many viewers, after watching the film, consider it to be "a good film", nor to what extent, and above all, based on what criteria (nor do we know how many of them regret having chosen that particular film!). This is why the only criterion based on measurable factors (commercial success in terms of profits generated, also in relation to the budget invested) does not guarantee a level of objectivity - even if, in the common perception, a "blockbuster" film seems to imply general approval by the audience (despite the heterogeneity of the latter). Furthermore, the commercial success (or failure) of a film may or may not be accompanied by positive evaluations expressed in a variety of different ways, for example, through word of mouth on the internet, the purchase of film-related products *(merchandising)*, the impact that the film itself may have on opinions, tastes, and even the daily habits of people who may have seen the film only once, and hastily - and there are films that are 'trendy' at a certain moment in time, which quickly exhaust their appeal and, after perhaps a huge burst of interest, often fall into oblivion. All these factors lead us to consider that the 'success' of a film is only a partially "measurable" criterion, and that many films, for a variety of reasons, can continue to be seen and appreciated by a variety of audiences even if the latter remain in a sense "invisible" because they do not fully count toward box office figures.

In the Internet age, with almost all current films and a certain portion of past films available online, it is impossible to know how many viewers a particular film has had, and/or continues to have, especially months or years after its initial release. Even theatrical distribution, which obeys very specific market criteria, has a decisive influence on the number of potential viewers: while multiplexes in large cities can offer many different films simultaneously in their ten or fifteen "rooms" and keep them 'on the bill' for medium to long periods, in small towns only blockbusters or films with almost guaranteed success are often available, perhaps screened for just a weekend. And while in the past films that went on to become famous began by being screened in only a few theatres in a large city, then achieved a certain popularity thanks to "word of mouth," today a film that is intended to be promoted immediately is distributed simultaneously in thousands of theatres; and the number of tickets sold in the first weekend of programming counts, to the point that the expensive initial budget can be recouped in just a few days.

Furthermore, behind the sterile box office figures lie profound differences in the composition of the target audience, which makes the criterion of commercial success even more relative. We know, for example, that cinema-goers are mostly young people, that people in large cities go to the cinema more often than those in small towns, and that, as with other cultural consumption, socio-economic and professional status can be a determining factor.

It may be interesting to compare the global box office results in 2022 with the rankings of the *IMDb* website survey and the *Sight and Sound* magazine survey for the same year, mentioned in the previous section. The top ten highest-grossing films in 2022 according to *Box Office Mojo* (a website belonging to the IMDb group) were:

1. Avatar - The way of water (James Cameron, USA 2022)

2. Top Gun: Maverick (Joseph Kosinski, USA 2022)

3. Jurassic World Dominion (Colin Trevorrow, USA 2022)

4. Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (Sam Raimi, USA 2022)

5. Minions: The rise of Gru (Kyle Balda, Brad Ableson and Jonathan del Val, USA 2022)
6. Black Panther: Wakanda forever (Ryan Coogler, USA 2022)
7. The Batman (Matt Reeves, USA 2022)
8. Thor: Love and Thunder (Taika Waititi, USA 2022)
9. Water Gate Bridge (Tsui Hark and Chen Kaige, China 2022)
10. Puss in boots: The last wish (Joel Crawford, USA 2022)

Avatar - The way of water (James Cameron, USA 2022)

As can be seen, none of the most successful box office hits in 2022 appear in both of the aforementioned rankings. How should we interpret this data? On the one hand, it should be remembered that the surveys cited asked respondents to mention the films they considered the "best" or 'greatest' in the entire history of cinema (or at least all the films the respondents were aware of, without any time restrictions), while the "hard" box office data refer to the most-watched films in cinemas during a single year. We have seen that films from long ago have remained in the memory of viewers and critics, which implies a broad perspective. On the other hand, the commercial success of a film, not to mention 'success' defined according to other criteria we have discussed, can be sensational but also limited in time: how many of the most watched films in 2022 continued to be successful in subsequent years, and, above all, how many will remain in the memory of viewers and critics years or decades later?

4. The brilliant use of technology

Many films have been appreciated, and continue to be so, for their effective, sometimes even "masterful" use of technology. Cinema, itself an innovative and relatively recent technology, has always been attentive and quick to use the technological developments that became available, from the integration between images and sounds at the end of the 1920s to the increasingly sophisticated use of colour, from large panoramic screens to the use of computers in all stages of film production, right up to the latest developments in Artificial Intelligence. Cinema is certainly also about technology, and its products can also be judged on the basis of how filmmakers use them. This applies both to the production of a film and to the way it is consumed by the public. In the first case, technologies are at work, to a greater or lesser extent, both in the pre-production phase (e.g., in casting, scriptwriting, preparing locations, sets, costumes, etc.), during the actual production phase (e.g., in the choice and use of cameras, lenses, lights, recording devices, etc.), and during the post-production phase (e.g., in editing, the use of sound, music, special effects, etc.). But technology has also played and continues to play a crucial role in terms of audience enjoyment: just think of the

innovations in both the video sector (such as the adoption of large screens and digital projectors) and the audio sector (such as the use of high-fidelity sound diffusers). By promptly adopting emerging new technologies, cinema has been able to cope with times of crisis, such as fierce competition from television since the 1950s or new viewing opportunities provided by the digital revolution and the Internet in more recent times.

Of course, viewers also differ greatly in terms of how sensitive or interested they are in the more technological aspects of watching a film, aspects that can become more or less important in their evaluation of the film itself. Once again, the audience is made up of people who bring with them a very diverse range of knowledge, skills, and experiences, which makes them more or less ready to use the criterion of "technological excellence" in their overall assessment of a film. There are viewers who are very attentive, for example, to the use of camera angles, editing, and soundtrack in a film, and others whose attention is rather limited to the story, the actors, and the narrative development, for whom the technical, formal, or stylistic aspects take a back seat or are even ignored.

Certainly, viewers' reactions to the use of technology, or rather the "cinematic language" assisted by technology, can change over time. In recent decades, in particular, the rapid development of digital technology and the widespread availability of devices that allow virtually anyone to "make movies" (such as video cameras, smartphones, computers, etc.) have reduced the distance that traditionally separated cinema as a "wonder machine" from its users: today's viewers are on average more "savvy," able to immediately judge, for example, the quality of special effects or the use of the soundtrack. In a sense, accustomed to the constant new "wonders" made available by the digital world, today's viewers demand more and more from cinema, particularly from screenings in movie theatres, and producers, directors, and professionals in the sector are therefore encouraged to respond to these new expectations with continuous improvements and adjustments - to the point of wondering if and to what extent "theatre" cinema will be able to withstand competition from the new multimedia landscape. Let's consider a few examples in particular.

4.1. Special effects

When today's young people watch a film by Georges Méliès, a pioneer of French cinema, they immediately judge the special effects produced by this director as clumsy or naive - they could probably do better themselves, even just using a home computer or smartphone. But in doing so, they forget to place Méliès' work in the context of his era: these films were made just a few years after the birth of cinema, in an artisanal way and with very few tools available. And the special effects chosen by Steven Spielberg for *Jaws*, with the sea monster also created in ways that we would now describe as "artisanal" (and which, incidentally, is only seen briefly towards the end of the film) are certainly not comparable to those available today thanks to computers. Yet, decades later, *Jaws* remains a highly compelling film that is not at all "dated" from a spectacular point of view, proving that sophisticated technology is not necessarily a prerequisite for making a "good" film, and that everything ultimately depends on filmmakers' mastery of the medium of cinema (which is also, but not only, technology).

Escamotage d'une dame chez Robert-Houdin

Jaws (Steven Spielberg, USA 1975)

(Georges Méliès, Francia 1896)

4.2. Editing

A similar argument could be made for *editing*: while we are now accustomed to the dizzying and phantasmagorical alternation of sequences in today's films, we forget that, although this is now made possible, and relatively easy, by new technologies, in the not-so-distant past, the astonishing results achieved by directors such as Eisenstein (himself a theorist of editing) in *Battleship Potemkin*, or by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, were the result of meticulous manual "cut and paste" work that was not delegated to a computer.

Battleship Potemkin/*Броненосец «Потёмкин»* (Sergej Michajlovič Ėjzenštejn, URSS 1925)

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, USA 1941)

4.3. Long takes

The *long take*, i.e., a long uninterrupted shot without editing cuts, has been the subject of much discussion in recent years due to a number of examples considered by many to be masterful. Here too, it is useful to contextualize the use of this shooting technique from a historical perspective. It is certainly not a novelty: the example of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* is often cited, in which the action takes place in 'real time', in the sense that the duration of the film coincides with the time of the action being staged (in other words, creating a unity of time and place). In reality, at the time of this movie, there were no "films" long enough to allow such a long shot, so Hitchcock edited together a series of shots, connected in an almost imperceptible way. It is clear that such a result can only be appreciated by those who have prior knowledge of the film and/or of Hitchcock's cinematographic techniques. Other more recent films, such as Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu's *Birdman* or Sam Mendes' *1917*, have also managed to suggest the idea of a long take, even though in reality they are the result of sophisticated editing (which can still be appreciated by some viewers). Real long takes, in which the filming is truly uninterrupted, without cuts, are quite rare: one example is Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, which, also for the effect produced by this very long but fluid shot, was appreciated by many; or Philip Barantini's recent *Boiling Point*, which manages to hold the audience's attention and even create real dramatic tension with its virtuoso and masterful use of the long take. The fact remains, however, that for many viewers it may not be easy to notice that they are watching a slong take: after all, the charm and power of this way of filming are linked precisely to the fact that it aims to be imperceptible ...

Russian Ark/*Русский ковчег* (Aleksandr Sokurov, Germany-Russia 2002)

Boiling point (Philip Barantini, GB 2021)

4.4. Audience expertise and realism in staging

"The audience is so knowledgeable about the subject that if you make the slightest mistake, you can be sure it will spread far and wide on IMDb." James Gray (Note 7)

It has already been said that today's viewers are not only more "savvy," but also more knowledgeable: thanks to their familiarity with audiovisual production methods, they are often able to judge what they see on the big screen and identify even the smallest "mistakes" made by the director (or cinematographer, editor, screenwriter, and so on) - to an extent that was unthinkable just a few years ago. Thus, the final judgment on a film can be affected by even the smallest details, which in the eyes of the most attentive viewers constitute real "mortal sins." Not only that, but these critical comments are often shared online by film communities, or by simple fans of a film genre, series, or saga, thus becoming "viral," as James Gray states in this quote. Even in this case, however, viewers' prior knowledge and experience can make a difference: while some editing 'mistakes' may be stigmatized in a superhero movie, if seen, for example, in a film by Jean-Luc Godard, a well-known experimenter, they could be considered stylistic choices consciously adopted by the director to achieve a certain effect.

As an example of this sometimes obsessive attention that some viewers pay to a film, and their ability to be very demanding critics, one need only consult the comments that users of specialized sites (such as the oft-mentioned *IMDb*) post online: 'technical' errors *(goofs)* are listed meticulously - although this does not always imply a negative judgement of the films. Regarding *Fury*, one viewer writes:

"Where to even begin.... I don't make out to be a historian, but I take a keen interest in this time period, it's a fascinating, horrendous era, this .... doesn't give any historical fact or detail, it's basically a shoot 'em up movie which happens to be set during The Second World War ... It surprises me that they didn't have someone beating Hitler up, uppercutting Goebbels in a bunker action sequence." (Note 8)

Fury (David Ayer, USA-China-GB 2014)

Similarly, thanks to these attentive and meticulous viewers, we discover that Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, during the same scene, eats a croissant in one shot, but a pancake in the next shot...; that Cillian Murphy in *Oppenheimer* is cheered by people waving American flags with 50 stars... but that in 1945, when the scene takes place, there were only 48 stars on the flag...; that in *The Holdovers*,

set in the 1970s, modern cars are clearly visible parked in one scene...; and that in the famous chariot race scene in *Ben Hur,* one of the actors is wearing a watch... and so on...

5. Watching a film ... with mind, heart, and body

A film's ability to stimulate reflection (i.e., its "edifying" value) and its ability to provoke emotions (i.e., its "exciting" value) are actually two closely related and, in a sense, indivisible factors. Processing information and experiencing emotions (i.e., working "with the mind" and working "with the heart") are not two distinct processes, even though many traditions of thought, especially Western ones, have always separated cognition and emotion. Emotions are not simply the body's response to a stimulus, but are one with the mind that processes that stimulus, and emotion is an integral part of the process of understanding and interpretation. The same sensory abilities through which we perceive stimuli from external inputs accompany the mind's activity from the outset, aimed at decoding and giving meaning to the content of those stimuli. Even when watching a film, understanding, interpreting, and evaluating what we see and hear *(cognitive activities)* go hand in hand with the emotions that the images and sounds perceived by our senses *(affective activities)* provoke in us. According to this perspective, therefore, it makes very little sense to separate reflection and emotion, and the value of a film can be judged by considering the 'edifying' and 'exciting' aspects together, as inseparable.

But there is more than that. The traditional separation between "body" and 'mind' is increasingly being questioned by theories of "embodied cognition" (Note 9): our thinking is so rooted in somatic and sensory mechanisms that information processing and the triggering of affectivity occur through stimulation of our entire body and are accompanied by physical sensations, which are one with thoughts and emotions. When our mind processes information, our entire organism is active, for example with the perception of a position or movement in the space of our body. On closer inspection, this perspective is not so far removed from "popular psychology," according to which the viewing of certain images and/or the perception of certain sounds simultaneously stimulates, in addition to the understanding of these stimuli, emotions "embodied" in somatic reactions: those images and/or sounds make our heart beat faster, stimulate sweating, give us a "lump in our throat," send shivers down our spine, make us cry or laugh, give us a feeling of "relief" (as if our body were lifted upwards) or "prostration" (as if our body were pushed downwards) ...

It therefore makes only relative sense to divide "mind," "heart," and "body," considering the 'uplifting' value of a film as separate from its "exciting" value. If, in the next two sections, we make this separation, it is only for the purpose of addressing these complex issues with an analysis that facilitates our exploration, without ever forgetting the close interrelationship that characterizes these different but at the same time so integrated aspects of our experience of watching films.

6. The edifying value of a film

It is not uncommon for a film to be appreciated (and therefore considered "a good film") if, at the end of the viewing, the viewers feel that they have learned something, that they have become somewhat more informed or sensitized, and this with regard to a wide range of topics or aspects: for example, historical events or figures; geographical, social, and political situations and contexts; ideas or ideologies; and even themselves, as viewers and as people, to the point of gaining a better understanding of profound meanings concerning space, time, human life... As always, not all viewers share this approach to a film, nor the desire or need to draw meanings from the film that go beyond the simple "enjoyment" of a story, a character, or a performer (whatever one may mean by "enjoyment"). As already mentioned, the expectations on the basis of which a film is chosen for

viewing can be as many and varied as the viewers themselves; therefore, even the positive evaluation of a film on the basis of its potential for "personal enrichment" depends primarily on the attitude and motivation underlying the "use" that one intends to make of a film.

The appreciation of a film from the point of view of its instructive, educational, or otherwise "edifying" value also depends greatly on the prior knowledge and experience of each viewer. If, for example, I am familiar with the story being told and/or its characters, or the situations and contexts depicted, it will be easier for me to compare what I already know with the 'new' that the film offers me, and thus come away from the viewing with the feeling that I have learned something rather than having witnessed a parade of things that are 'old' and obvious to me. The gap between 'old' and 'new', or between the 'already known' and 'discoveries', therefore depends on familiarity with the content and ideas conveyed by the film, or, in other words, on the distance between my knowledge/experience and what the film depicts. A film belonging to a culture different from my own can be more difficult to understand and judge: beyond the language used, and regardless of any subtitles, which do not always help to follow the dialogues smoothly, even the gestures, interpersonal relationships, situations, and contexts of a film can be difficult to interpret, and the risk of "intercultural misunderstanding" is always lurking. Even the ways in which cinematic language is used, closely linked to the artistic and aesthetic choices of the director and his collaborators, can create some problems of interpretation and, consequently, of evaluation. A film such as *Rashomon*, which focuses on the different versions of a samurai's murder provided by several characters, can certainly lends itself to more in-depth interpretations by those who are familiar with Japanese history and know how to evaluate the different social and cultural contexts that form the backdrop to the individual characters.

Rashomon (Akira Kurosawa, Japan 1950)

The same type of difficulty can arise with regard to the historical period in which the film is set. A film such as Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* can be appreciated in a general way by an undifferentiated audience, but those who have knowledge of the 18th century, the wars that plagued that century, and the social and cultural rules of the time will find deeper reasons for appreciation. The same can be said of a film such as Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*, with its description of the decline of the noble classes at the time of the formation of the Kingdom of Italy in the mid-19th century. (Incidentally, the more 'expert' viewer may also find reasons to appreciate the meticulousness with which directors such as Kubrick and Visconti took care of the precision, accuracy, and authenticity of the staging, down to the smallest details). On the contrary, we have just seen that viewers who are well informed about the events and contexts of World War II can easily identify the "technical" errors made in a film.

Barry Lyndon (Stanley Kubrick, GB 1975)

The leopard/*Il gattopardo* (Luchino Visconti, Italy-France 1963)

Especially in the past, a film set in a period and context that viewers might not be familiar with would often begin with some explanations and contextualization: for example, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* opens with a fairly detailed summary of the political situation in Morocco during World War II, providing direct information (accompanied by maps) that will prove crucial to understanding the events and characters described in the film. Today, this type of 'preliminary information' has become rarer, limited, for example, to the opening words 'Based on a true story'; on the other hand, it is very common at the end of a film to see images showing the real people whose story is told in the film, and/or further information about, for example, the final fate of these people or the subsequent development of the issue dealt with in the film itself. This is the case with *American Graffiti*, in which at the end of the film we are told what happened to the characters, captured at a crucial moment in their lives (the end of high school, the beginning of college) and at a very particular historical moment (the Vietnam War).

Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, USA 1942)

American Graffiti (George Lucas, USA 1973)

"The less experience you have of a subject, the more you will believe what you see." (Note 10)

Certainly, based on a general belief that a film reflects reality, there may be a tendency to accept without reservation characters, events, situations, and details that one has no direct knowledge or experience of: obviously, not everyone has been to a party of the super-rich or shot their attacker (let alone faced aliens or navigated the Metaverse). On the contrary, if the film offers us an examination of the relationships between teachers and students in a classroom, we are more likely to identify with these characters and therefore evaluate the authenticity and plausibility with which they are described (we have all been students, and some of the viewers are or have been teachers). More complex is the question of psychological familiarity (or distance) between us and characters with whom we initially share little or nothing: but even in this case, the principle of 'suspension of disbelief' applies, whereby, from this point of view, a 'good' film could be one that manages, even if only for the limited duration of the film itself, to make us identify, or at least sympathize or empathize, with the heroine of *Million Dollar Baby* (even if we are men) and with the gay characters in Brokeback Mountain (even if we are heterosexual).

Million Dollar Baby (Clint Eastwood, USA 2004)

Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, USA 2005)

Even more complex is the question of the "edifying" value of a film that we might appreciate for the insight it offers into mental states, moral dilemmas, existential meanings such as the meaning of life or death ... and here we enter slippery and highly subjective territory, where many (or some) may think that a film, as a work of art, can go far beyond the mere representation of stories and characters and instead aspire to convey the deeper meaning of human experience; and that the camera does not merely record what has been placed in front of it, but can at least give us a glimpse of the invisible and inaccessible that lies behind and beneath things. When faced with films that, more or less consciously, offer suggestions and insights and not just facts and circumstances, viewers' opinions can obviously vary greatly. An IMDb user provided this review (summarized here) of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (Note 11):

*"*The Tree of life i*s a fundamentally polarising experience of the highest order. There will be those who view it as a mess. A sentimental, art-farty shambles. A two hour long perfume commercial stuffed with "meaningful" abstract shots and scenes. A melange of whispered preposterous platitudes and pretentious, "meaning of life" and infuriatingly glib sentimentality ... There will be others though who view* The Tree of Life *as an elegiac meditation on memory and grief. They'll think it's a lyrical and visual poem. They'll see discussions of familial remembrance, the friction between father and son, the birth of morality, the Universe and universal truths."*

The user rightly points out that the film lends itself to "polarized" opinions. What may give rise to these disagreements is above all the elusive nature of the experiences described, with the inevitable consequence that the words used to describe what is perceived by viewers are so abstract as to border on extreme subjectivity. What, in fact, can be meant by "lyrical and visual poem"? And above all, how can abstract conceptualizations such as "discussions about the birth of morality, the universe, and universal truths" be shared with other viewers? Here, the differences within the audience become almost insurmountable, and we can only accept that *The Tree of Life* may be "a beautiful film" for some and an "unbearable mess" for others...

The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, USA 2011)

Certainly, the issue is made very complex by the fact that the meanings conveyed by a film are, as has been said, actually *re*worked and *re*constructed by viewers, who can thus transcend the original intentions of the director and/or screenwriter (assuming it is possible to know the filmmakers' opinions in detail). The theme dealt with in a film, for example, can be generalised far beyond the characters and events narrated in the film itself, acquiring a more universal value, which we often do not know how much was explicitly intended in the original project. The parable of the protagonist of *Million Dollar Baby,* who pursues her dream of becoming a professional female boxing champion but, following an illegal blow during a match, is left paralysed and therefore asks her coach (also and above all a father figure) to end her suffering, lends itself to profound and universal meanings, from the parent/child relationship to the ambiguous values that a certain vision of sporting success can convey, to the moral question raised by euthanasia. And *Brokeback Mountain* prompts, even beyond the empathy with which one can view the characters, deeper reflections on diversity, intolerance and the weight of social contexts and conditioning in determining the personal destinies of individuals.

Ultimately, the meanings, values, ideas (or ideologies) that can be found in a film are situated at different levels of depth of understanding and interpretation: films can say or want to say several things at once to a variety of viewers – and sometimes these "messages" can be (intentionally or not) laden with ambiguity. For example, in many films centred on gangsters or other types of "criminals", these figures are portrayed in such a way as to take on an almost "heroic" stature, sometimes making them more attractive than their victims - with a clear moral ambivalence. Given that, practically from the outset, cinema has been accused of promoting negative role models, especially in terms of violence and sex, it is not surprising that, particularly in times of transition and crisis, films themselves have taken on the burden of "warning" viewers about the meanings conveyed, as if to "cover their backs" against possible accusations of immorality (messages that, paradoxically, may sometimes have helped films achieve greater success than expected and which, in any case, do not prevent viewers from reacting in sometimes unexpected ways, thus making a film "speak" in a different way than expected).

Scarface, for example, which tells the tumultuous story of a mafia boss betrayed by his morbid love for his sister, was potentially a "risky" film (and its release was postponed for a year by the censors), so some intertitles were placed at the beginning that not only invited the audience to 'distance themselves' from what they were about to see, but also urged the public authorities to take more effective action against these criminal gangs. We read that "The purpose of this film is to ask the government, 'What are you going to do about it? The government is your government. What do you intend to do?" And the original title itself reads '*Scarface, the shame of a nation".*

Fifty years later, *Making love*, one of the first films to openly address homosexuality, was equally cautious in addressing the audience, starting with the trailer, which literally carried this message: "*We believe that* Making love *breaks new ground in its sensitive portrayal of a young executive who discovers that her husband is experiencing a crisis of sexual identity.* Making love *deals openly and honestly with this sensitive subject. It is not sexually explicit. But it may be too strong for some people.* Making love *is courageous but sensitive. We are proud of its honesty. We applaud its courage.'* Of course, this "caution", which seeks not to offend anyone's sensibilities, is reflected in the superficiality with which the characters and situations are ultimately described. But even this type of explicit message, which 'reveals" the ideology behind certain choices, does not prevent viewers from reacting in very different ways.

Scarface, shame of a nation (Howard Hawks, USA 1932)

Making love (Arthur Hiller, USA 1982)

In this complex web of relationships between a film, its "author" and its viewers, it is not always easy to determine clearly how much a film reflects the idea (or ideology) of its author and to what extent the viewer is responsible for attributing certain meanings and messages to a film. Certainly, a film tends to reflect the society in which it is made, but it has always been the case, and particularly with the explosion of media communication in recent decades, that society itself is also shaped by the forms of communication produced within it. As a viewer, I can therefore judge that a film does not reflect the reality around me, but there is no doubt that it conveys a "collective imagination", in which I may or may not recognise myself.

In this sense, a film can truly be a mirror in which viewers can reflect themselves, coming into contact with stories and situations that they may have experienced in real life, that are part of their present experience, or even that open up perspectives on possible and alternative lives and worlds. This significantly increases the value of viewing, leading viewers to discover something about themselves, the community in which they live or, more generally, the society of which they are a part. In other words, a film can broaden the horizons of the mind and, as we have already said, take on more universal meanings: a film about childhood can, on the one hand, make me relive my childhood and, on the other, lead me to relive my childhood, and on the other hand, lead me to reflect on childhood in general. And a film like *The father*, which explicitly deals with senile dementia, can strike a chord and make viewers reflect on the psychological and social dimensions of this experience, even in those viewers who are not directly experiencing this type of problem.

The father (Florian Zeller, Francia-GB 2020)

The cinematic experience can sometimes be likened to an *intercultural experience*: the contact with a culture different from our own, which in its most acute forms can take on the characteristics of a real 'culture shock', allows us, on the one hand, to experience *differences* first-hand, while on the other, it also makes us realise the *relativity* of our customs, traditions and values. In other words, contact with the "different" (which cinema can offer) can make the "new" more familiar and at the same time make what is familiar to us "new", in the sense that we no longer take our personal experience for granted, inevitable and absolute. This is the case, for example, with films from cultures that are very distant from the Western one (which we consider "standard", i.e. taken for granted), which may initially seem difficult and "alienating", but which then, as we continue watching and at the end of the film, may "open our eyes" to very different realities (which, however, can in some ways perhaps also appear *similar* to our own, if we are willing to go beyond the surface of what we see and hear).

As we have repeatedly pointed out, this tendency to consider a "good" film to be one that has some degree of "educational" or "formative" value certainly does not belong to viewers who see cinema as an experience of pure "escapism". But between the opposite extremes of pure escapism on the

one hand and profound reflection on the other, there are obviously many intermediate positions. The same can be said of the fact of considering a "good" film one that *moves* us.

7. The emotional value of a film

As mentioned above, viewers almost literally “incorporate” the emotions aroused by watching a film, including the emotions of its characters, with whom viewers tend to identify. The importance of this “somatisation”, whereby the whole *body*, together with the *mind* and *heart*, processes thoughts and perceives emotions, leads us to consider the evaluation of a film as an inseparable combination of *aesthetic* appreciation and *emotional* value - in other words, emotions are embodied in that whole that is the living organism.

Having once again made this premise, we immediately recognise that the value of a film as a conveyor of emotions (i.e. the assessment that a “good” film is one that moves us) is closely dependent on the oft-mentioned *individual differences:* it is indisputable that, when watching a romantic melodrama, there are those who cry and those who are not moved at all, just as when watching a horror film, there are those who close their eyes so as not to see and those who even smile at the brutality of certain scenes. But emotional reactions also change over time within the same person: how often are we surprised when a film that may have disturbed us when we first saw it leaves us indifferent years later? The film is clearly the same, but we have changed, and along with us, the sensibilities of audiences who have viewed the film over time have certainly changed. We are immersed in a culture that is constantly changing, sometimes even abruptly, in terms of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations, and this social dimension of the reactions provoked by a film cannot be underestimated.

In this sense, the situations and contexts in which the film-viewing experience takes place also have a considerable impact, even if it is not always immediately perceptible: watching a comedy film alone, rather than with a group of fun-loving friends, is clearly different, just as watching a romantic tearjerker alone is different from watching it with your partner, or watching a film in the intimacy of your own living room or in a theatre alongside dozens or hundreds of other people whose reactions you can somehow perceive. Let us add, still on the subject of individual differences, that emotions can also depend, for example, on the appearance on screen of an actor or actress we admire, or even simply on the “atmosphere” emanating from a film that clearly belongs to a genre we particularly enjoy. Finally, let us not forget that our previous experiences, i.e. the baggage of thoughts, memories and attitudes with which we approach the viewing experience, influence our understanding of the film itself and the emotions it may (or may not) evoke in us. The heartbreaking ending of *The Bridges of Madison County*, when the couple played by Meryl Streep and Clint Eastwood part ways forever after a few days of shared happiness, will have a different impact on different viewers, to the point that some would say that “if you haven't had a certain experience, you can't really understand this film” (where "understand" obviously means not only making sense of the story but also feeling the emotions it evokes).

The bridges of Madison County (Clint Eastwood, USA 1995)

Starting from this observation, it is interesting to note the emotions associated with the *ending* of films, and in particular with the "happy ending" that has characterised, and still characterises, a large part of past and recent film productions. A happy ending is generally appreciated by viewers, even if "happy" can mean very different things (Note 12): in *Pretty Woman*, we can rejoice that, after many vicissitudes that had jeopardised the relationship between Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, in the finale he literally climbs a building to reach her as she waits for him, like a Prince Charming freeing the beautiful princess imprisoned in a tower. But in the ending of *Stella Dallas,* when the mother, whom her daughter had abandoned years earlier, sees her daughter about to get married from outside a house, we witness Stella's pain, mixed with happiness, as she walks away in tears ... It is certainly not a "happy" ending in the strict sense (certainly not the same as *Pretty Woman*), but we share the emotions conveyed by this scene and perhaps identify with a mother who can only rejoice at her daughter's wedding, even though she regrets having lost her forever ... So, there may be "positive" endings for viewers (at least for many of them), even if the "pleasure" of the epilogue has very different meanings.

Pretty woman (Gary Marshall, USA 1990)

Stella Dallas (King Vidor, USA 1937)

The typical Hollywood *happy ending* has often been criticised and even despised as manipulative towards the viewer, whose emotions are stirred according to a precise plan that dictates if, when and how to make them laugh, cry, and so on. Not only that, but it has been and is quite easy to "unmask" the ideology behind many of these "happy endings", in the sense of uncovering the intent of certain films which, for example, do nothing more than confirm the *status quo* without questioning certain values or attitudes (e.g., the reconfirmation of the heterosexual couple as a prelude to an inevitable marriage in *Pretty Woman* or the maternal sacrifice required by the force of social conventions in *Stella Dallas*). However, if it is legitimate to accept a critical analysis of the values and ideologies conveyed (more or less explicitly and more or less consciously) by a film, it is equally legitimate to recognise the right of viewers to be moved and touched regardless of the critical discourse on the film itself.

As a matter of fact, these considerations lead us to highlight a broader factor, namely the distinction between *ethics* and *aesthetics*, or, in other words, the appreciation of a film for its *moral value* rather than for its value as a *work of art.* Here too, we can identify different if not conflicting positions between those who claim that aesthetic value cannot be separated from moral value and those who defend a work regardless of its ethical content. According to the first position, the emotions aroused by a film are therefore only acceptable if they are morally justified, or, in other words, ethically unacceptable content cannot lead to aesthetic appreciation - a film cannot be "good" if it conveys morally questionable content. The second position asserts the opposite, namely that a "good" film can also be one with morally ambiguous content: Oscar Wilde had already said that "*There are no such things as moral or immoral books. Books are well written or badly written, that is all"* (Note 13). Wilde obviously made a drastic distinction between the *aesthetic* value of a work, in the sense of its ability to give pleasure, and its *ethical* value, in the sense of its ability both to provoke reflection (what we have called the "edifying value" of a film) and to elicit morally significant emotional reactions (e.g., approval or rejection of the behaviour of the characters in the film).

On the basis of considerations of this kind, controversy can arise over the responsibility that films have in representing, for example, violence, which cinema could promote in society, especially among particularly sensitive or "at-risk" groups of people, such as young people. The issue is a thorny one, and becomes even more relevant when it is the director himself who makes delicate choices in this regard. *Funny Games*, for example, which depicts the massacre of a family by two young criminals, stops at nothing and reaches levels of violent tension that many viewers found unbearable; and it does not matter that director Michael Haneke adopted certain measures that, according to him, could "distance" viewers from the images (such as leaving the killings off-screen, but still showing plenty of blood, or, in a scene where one of the two criminals is apparently killed, allowing his partner to "rewind the tape", going back in time and bringing him back to life ...). These uses (some would say "abuses") of cinematic language, as in other films the representation of violence as if it were a "comic strip", do not prevent viewers from relating to what they see and hear, often provoking very negative emotions. And it is certainly no consolation that a film like *Funny Games*, given its success, was remade almost literally by the same director for the American market a few years later.

Funny games (Michael Haneke, Austria 1997)

The fact is that, once we sit down in front of a screen, we become, whether we like it or not, "voyeurs" – cinema has always been well aware of this fact and has exploited it in every possible way. Consider Hitchcock, one of the greatest theorists of the role of the viewer in cinema: even a film like *Rear Window*, which does not contain particularly violent scenes (despite telling the story of a man who kills his wife and cuts her up), is all about the position of the protagonist James Stewart who, immobilised with a leg in plaster, can find nothing better to do than observe (or rather, spy on) his neighbours, even using a telephoto lens: and we, the viewers, together with him, participate in this blatant intrusion into the lives of others.

Rear window (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1955)

Violence can, of course, be not only physical but also psychological, which only increases the criticality of the representation. Filmmakers' "manipulation" of the audience can, for example, play on a fascination, bordering on the morbid or sadomasochistic, for stories with high emotional potential (whether violent or erotic is irrelevant). This applies not only to "fiction" cinema, but also to the documentary genre, which is only apparently more "objective". The eye of the camera (and of the people who handle it in various capacities, from the director to the director of photography) is never really "neutral", as filming always involves conscious choices (from deciding what to leave out of the frame to the length of the shots, from the editing of the sequences to the pace of the narrative, and so on), so the final result always involves a judgement that, once again, has to do with ethical and aesthetic criteria. A "docufiction" film (a mixture of fiction and live footage) such as *The Voice of Hind Rajab* caused a great stir. It depicted the harrowing story of a Palestinian girl who, imprisoned in a car together with her murdered relatives, desperately tried to contact someone via a

mobile phone. In addition to professional actors playing the rescuers who were unable to help, the film used real recordings of the girl's voice, with a shocking result for viewers. Was it acceptable to use a document such as that of the Palestinian girl in a film that was otherwise "fictional"? How far can we go in sensationalising pain? The film, which is nonetheless a valuable document for understanding the plight of the Palestinians, and which won the Silver Lion - Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, raises very complex and thorny issues that call into question the very nature of cinema and the role played by filmmakers and audiences - perhaps now more than ever, given the proliferation of images in which we are constantly - and often unknowingly - immersed.

صوت هند رجب, Ṣawt al-Hind Rajab/*The Voice of Hind Rajab* (Kawthar ibn Haniyya, Tunisia-Francia-GB-USA 2025)

Certainly, the question of the alleged (a)morality of works cannot be separated from a historical perspective. As we have already noted, the sensibilities of cinema audiences vary over time, as do all the socio-cultural variables that permeate the beliefs, attitudes and values of a society. What until a few decades ago might have caused scandal (for example, in the representation of sexuality) is now widely accepted without batting an eyelid, and a scene of unprecedented violence such as the epilogue of *Gangster Story*, which caused a huge stir at the time, is perhaps now accepted, at least by some viewers, with less emotional involvement (although this does not detract from the question of the sometimes manipulative power of images). Just compare how censorship bans have changed over time: when it was released in 1976, *Taxi Driver* was banned in France for viewers under the age of 18, but today this ban has been lowered to under 12s. And a film that many would consider "suitable for families", such as *Avatar*, was released in the United States in 2009 with a ban on children under 13 due to "intense epic battle sequences, sensuality, coarse language and smoking" ... (Note 14).

Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, USA 1967)

Taxi driver (Martin Scorsese, USA 1976)

Avatar (James Cameron, USA-GB 2009)

In conclusion, once again, in the ethics vs aesthetics debate, we are faced not only with ideologically different positions, but also with contrasting, if not opposing, attitudes towards the evaluation and appreciation of a film, and the conclusion can only be the same as we have repeatedly expressed in this paper - namely, that all positions and attitudes can be accepted, provided that we remain willing to discuss and compare them, with the aim, as stated in our *Introduction*, of trying to understand without pretending to explain (or, worse, defending one position by denying the other).

8. The question of novelty or originality

A further criterion by which a film can be considered a "good" film is whether it is perceived as *original*, i.e. with aspects that in some way qualify it as at least partly "new" compared to everything the viewer has seen before. The originality or novelty of a film calls into question, first and foremost, its belonging to a particular film genre. If we identify a certain film as a western, rather than a thriller or a science fiction film, we immediately refer to the entire production of that genre to which the "new" film seems to belong. By definition, a genre has aspects that characterise it more or less strongly (e.g. the type of stories, characters, sets, soundtracks, etc.), which every film that belongs to that genre must display. But the crucial characteristic of a "genre" film is that, while it must refer to a codified *tradition*, it must also, to some extent, introduce some element of *novelty*: from the audience's point of view, viewers must be gratified both by rediscovering familiar and beloved aspects, and, at the same time, by the presentation of something new, without which there is a risk of boredom. Therefore, a first factor that influences the originality of a work concerns how it fits into the "canon" of its genre while offering elements of novelty and "surprise". This continues to be true even if we consider the fact that many films today seem to belong to many different genres (e.g. *dramedies*, or dramatic comedies), and that many films can be considered *hybrids*: adventure is mixed with science fiction, crime with comedy, thriller with musical, and so on.

Originality can relate in particular to the technological aspects of film production, but in this sense, the historical perspective is crucial: a film such as *The Robe* may have seemed very innovative in 1953 given its use of Cinemascope, a screen format now largely surpassed by other technological marvels (no wonder this film remains in history mainly as a pioneering example of that technology); Similarly, we should consider the revolutionary novelty, in 1927, of *The Jazz Singer*, the first example of a film with sound sequences.

The robe (Henry Koster, USA 1953)

The jazz singer (Alan Crosland, USA 1927)

Similarly, while we are now accustomed to impressive aerial shots taken with drones, the shot from above in a famous sequence from Hitchcock's *The Birds* (from minute **01:23** in the video below**)** must have seemed almost revolutionary in 1963; and, to provide a much more recent example, *Taxi Tehran*, filmed by director Panahi from inside a car using a smartphone (to avoid trouble with censorship), fits into a range of innovative ways of filming, almost making a virtue of necessity.

The birds (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1963)

تاکسی/Tehran Taxi (Jafar Panahi, Iran 2015)

New technologies, as we know, quickly render obsolete innovations that once might have enjoyed more lasting fame. Thus, *S1m0ne,* which in 2002 introduced the character of a beautiful woman created on a computer by a director in crisis (with whom he falls in love), now pales in comparison to many films featuring robots, automatons, "replicants", avatars and so on ...

S1m0ne (Andrew Niccol, USA 2002)

If the two most famous Hollywood films of 1939 (*Gone with the Wind* and T*he Wizard of Oz,* directed by the same director) owed at least part of their popularity to their highly innovative use of colour, today it is the use of black and white that is rather rare and therefore, in a certain sense, "original".

Gone with the wind (Victor Fleming, USA 1939)

The wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, USA 1939)

And while a musical film produced by the Indian film industry (Bollywood) does not cause much of a stir, given that a large number of Bollywood films belong to the musical genre (or at least contain elements of a musical), *La La Land* was hailed, upon its release in 2016, as an original reinterpretation of the classic Hollywood musical of the 1950s.

La La Land (Damien Chazelle, USA 2016)

Similarly, the innovations in form and content of New Hollywood in the 1960s and 1970s introduced new elements into the quintessential Hollywood genre, the Western, for example by questioning the myth of the frontier and the image of "Indians" (i.e. Native Americans) conveyed by the "classic" Westerns of previous decades. This then almost revolutionary perspective helped shape the (few) westerns produced subsequently, leading to the experiments of Quentin Tarantino (who in *Django*

Unchained pays homage, among other things, to the original *Django*, one of the best films of the "spaghetti western" genre).

Django (Sergio Corbucci, Italy-Spain 1966)

Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino, USA 2012)

But originality is not just about technology or film genres. Sometimes, a particular use of techniques can convey a deeper conceptual meaning. We have already mentioned the extraordinary special effects created by George Méliès at the end of the 19th century, effects which, beyond their technical prowess, helped lay the foundations for cinema as a realm of fantasy and not just a recording of reality. And while other pioneers such as the Lumière brothers adopted a fixed shooting plan, constrained as they were by the near immobility of the camera, when Andy Warhol made *Empire* in 1965, a silent film with no story and no characters, in which the fixed camera films the same scene for 8 hours and 5 minutes, we are clearly faced with a provocation - a stylistic but also conceptual choice (the desire to record the passing of time, almost violating the very idea of cinema as an organisation of reality).

L'arrivée d'un train en gare à La Ciotat/The arrival of a train at La Ciotat Station(Lumière Brothers, France 1895)

Empire (Andy Warhol, USA 1965) - film clip

Originality can also relate to other aspects, such as innovations in *casting*, i.e. in assigning character types to actors: one of the reasons for the interest and popularity of a film such as *Guys and Dolls,* for example, was seeing Marlon Brando, already famous mainly for dramatic roles (such as in *A Streetcar Named Desire, The Wild One* and *On the Waterfront*), in a *musical* film.

Guys and dolls (Joseph L. Mankievicz, USA 1955)

One final consideration brings attention back, once again, to *individual differences*. Viewers differ from one another in how they perceive the novelty or originality of a film, especially in relation to the aforementioned issue of film genres. Some viewers may find many martial arts or superhero films repetitive, but seasoned and knowledgeable film buffs may find reasons to be interested in certain aspects (e.g., plot or character details, or even objects or sets) that others may miss; and even film critics may sharpen their analytical skills to highlight what they perceive as elements of novelty. Finally, let's not forget that the desire to appear "trendy" and "well-informed" may prompt some people to chase after what the media (or marketing campaigns, or word of mouth on the Internet) label as new and original products ...

Part 3: Mental mechanisms behind value attribution

1. Introduction

In this third part we will move from considering the criteria by which a film can be defined, at least by some viewers, as a "good" film, to examining the mental mechanisms that come into play in this process of value attribution, i.e. what operations a viewer performs in order to "love" a film.

Our starting point is the observation that human beings naturally tend to wonder about the causes of phenomena that attract their attention. When faced with certain experiences (e.g., seeing ivy twining around a tree trunk or a sudden change in the movement of the sea), we do not normally ask ourselves what the reason is behind what we see (we know that it is nature and its laws), even if rarer phenomena, which are not part of everyday experience and whose precise reasons are unknown (e.g., a volcanic eruption), may stimulate curiosity more than others, especially if we do not have the relevant knowledge. But this s*earch for causality* becomes much more pressing in social interactions, when everyday communication, which is the basis of our community life, can pose problems and thus stimulate reflection. As social beings, we are normally very sensitive, even if unconsciously, to the communicative acts in which we are involved. The signals we receive from others, through verbal language (words) and through non-verbal language (gestures, looks, smiles ...) are constantly interpreted in order to provide the most appropriate responses, but if something does not work, for example if these signals are ambiguous or unexpected, we immediately wonder what prompted our interlocutor to emit that signal - the search for the cause of this episode is driven by the premise, which we take for granted, that behind every communicative act there is an *intention* on the part of its sender. If someone asks me the time in front of a wall where a large clock hangs, or if a stranger

stares intently into my eyes, the perception of these communicative acts (verbal or non-verbal) triggers in me the need to understand what caused them. In other words, stimuli from others are normally considered intentional, i.e. the result of conscious choices on the part of our interlocutors: I can then hypothesise, for example, that the person asking me the time does not trust the clock on the wall or the one on their wrist, and that the person staring at me has recognised someone familiar in me...

2. Film as an intentional stimulus

Similarly, during and after watching a film, viewers constantly ask themselves, albeit usually completely unconsciously, what the filmmakers (not only the director, but all the other figures involved in this collective endeavour, such as the screenwriter, the director of photography, the editor, the score composer, and so on) are trying to say. This is particularly true if what we see and hear surprises or perplexes us because it is unusual, ambiguous, incomprehensible or even simply contrary to our expectations. In other words, we attribute a specific intention to the film (or rather, to its creator), which becomes all the more salient the more we are unable to immediately grasp its precise meaning. An image, a sound, a noise or a musical motif can thus mobilise our attention to try to interpret the underlying causes and at least hypothesise what goals, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, personality traits, or, to use a very general term, *mental states* led the filmmaker (the director or whoever else) to make the choices they made. In particular, when faced with ambiguous stimuli, we ask ourselves what the film wants us to understand, feel, judge ... what cognitive and emotional reactions it expects us to set in motion. In these cases, our attention becomes more conscious and, in a sense, we "distance" ourselves from the film in order to better interpret the stimulus (which we perceive as *intentional*) that is offered to us.

Of course, our everyday reality differs from that of cinema: even if a film claims to be realistic, i.e. to reflect reality, it is in fact the result of a selection and organisation of scenes, characters, behaviours ... usually carefully "manipulated" (in the positive or at least neutral sense of the word), based on cinematic conventions that we accept in a film but would not accept in real life. Not only do shots, scenes or sequences constantly move us through space and time, but they can also, unlike in everyday experiences, add other, alternative dimensions to what we see and hear: a scene can thus become allusive, ironic, symbolic ... There is no doubt that cinematic conventions such as editing or camera movements are linked to the ways in which we deal with and interpret real life, but at the same time they transcend everyday reality because they are used to serve an alternative, intentionally constructed reality, such as that of a film. Even a single object can take on a meaning and significance that go beyond its simple physical perception: in *The Kite Runner*, we see the two young protagonists (Amir, a wealthy, motherless Afghan boy from Kabul, and his friend Hassan, son of the poor servant of Amir's family) playing at "hunting" kites, i.e. trying to cut the string of their opponent's kite - the two boys are so good at it that they become champions of Kabul. The sight of kites immediately triggers possible experiences, memories and regrets in viewers (which naturally vary depending on the "baggage" that each viewer carries with her/him, but, when placed in a family, social and cultural context so distant from Western eyes, we may also ask ourselves (even unconsciously) what meaning they will take on in the film, what role they will play, whether they will, for example, advance the story or enrich the description of the characters or whether, on the contrary, they will be treated as mere props - and the answers we give to these questions will also determine how we perceive and remember these kites (and therefore the role they will play in our interpretation of the film). At the same time, the context of the two boys, who are friends but so different in terms of social background,

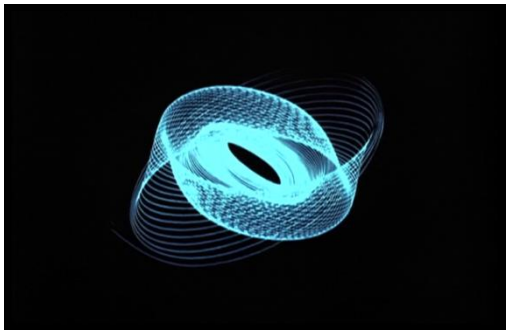
may also make us perceive, in the course of the film, that kites can become a symbol of freedom and liberation from heavy social and cultural constraints.

The kite runner (Marc Foster, USA 2007)

Our perception of what we see and hear coming from the screen is therefore based on our general ability to interpret our daily experiences, but the film, through its own devices, leads us to transcend the simple direct recognition of objects, characters and situations, prompting us to ask further questions about what the film itself intends to communicate through the introduction and organisation of these elements. When Hitchcock, in *Vertigo*, shows us the woman (Kim Novak) whom the detective (James Stewart) is following, entering a museum and sitting in front of a painting, then staring at the character depicted in the painting for a long time, he directs our attention to the woman's hair (A) and then immediately afterwards to that of the woman in the painting (B), which is styled in the same way. In this way, the hairstyle immediately takes on a meaning that transcends the mere physical fact to suggest a much more intriguing link between these two female figures. And the most attentive viewers (or even those who watch the film two or more times) will notice that Hitchcock uses the “spiral” motif (present in the hairstyle) as a recurring element in the film, starting with the opening credits (C), in which the detective has a nightmare in which he seems to fall into a vortex that swallows him up, to the spiral staircase of the monastery tower (D) where two crucial scenes take place.

A

B



C

D

Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1958)

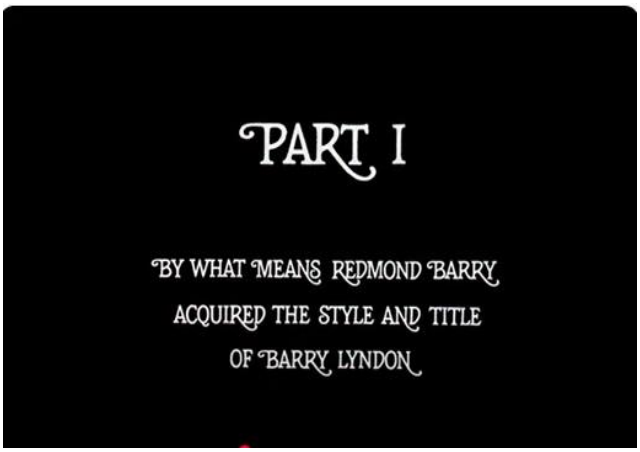
To give another example, when Eisenstein, in the aforementioned *Battleship Potemkin*, wants us to understand the reasons for the mutiny, he uses a montage of scenes among the sailors, placed in rapid succession with images of worms infesting the meat intended for meals (at **05:39**): this montage not only informs us about hygiene on board the ship, but also dramatically illuminates the conditions in which the sailors are kept and, more broadly, the rebellion against a violent and oppressive system. The juxtaposition of scenes is the device the director uses to "make the images speak", enriching them with a symbolic meaning that transcends the pure representation of objects. Once again, we make sense of what we see because, more or less consciously, we ask ourselves what intentions motivated the director in his choices of content and form: we enter his state of mind in order to interpret what we see. And, at least to a certain extent, we share with him/her the knowledge of the cinematic conventions used in the film: even if it is the first time we have seen this scene, and even if we are not film buffs, we understand that the fast editing is telling us something - something that goes beyond the images themselves.

Броненóсец «Потёмкин»/Battleship Potemkin (Sergej Michajlovič Ėjzenštejn, URSS 1925)

3. Attributing intentions to the director: from classic cinema to (post)modern cinema

Films certainly vary greatly in terms of the possibility for viewers to attribute intentions to the director. For example, "classical Hollywood" films (roughly at its peak between the 1940s and 1960s) were designed to offer the audience a linear and easily understandable story, with characters motivated by specific choices and, consequently, with a clear chain of cause and effect that translated into logically connected events, from the beginning to the often inevitable happy ending. A film produced with this type of device was therefore easy to understand and interpret, and all cinematic conventions served this basic function. But it was equally important that the devices (from the shots to the camera movements, from the editing to the soundtrack, and so on) remained hidden, so to speak, from the eyes of the viewers, in order to give the illusion that the film "proceeded on its own" and resulted in a fluid, always clearly understandable viewing experience. In this production system, the audience did not feel the need (nor did they have the opportunity) to question the director's intentions, who, like all the professionals involved, was thus "invisible". Of course, this did not prevent the directors themselves, especially those with "authorial" ambitions, to include moments and images in their films that could somehow stimulate viewers (perhaps not all of them) to pause and wonder about the meaning of what they were seeing and hearing: we have just seen how "classical" directors, as different as Hitchcock and Eisenstein, managed to "leave their mark" through sophisticated images with multiple and sometimes very complex meanings.

With the advent of "modern" cinema, coinciding with the so-called "New Hollywood" and the "new waves" *(nouvelle vagues)* of many new national film industries, the classical model was quickly thrown into crisis: faced with changing social and cultural scenarios, the new cinema responded with a renewal not only of content but also of form, with directors now often more inclined to "reveal" the hidden and implicit mechanisms of classical cinema, while at the same time taking on the role of "authors" more radically. In this way, viewers were also encouraged to take a more active and conscious approach to films and, at the same time, to take responsibility for asking themselves what the director's intentions were when faced with complex images. Even in this case, however, the film landscape remained varied and certainly not standardised or flattened into a few models. With subsequent "post-modern" developments, starting in the 1980s, cinema has further evolved towards forms of expression that challenge classical genres, sometimes re-inventing them in original ways, revisiting themes and forms of expression from the past, with a greater awareness of the "mechanisms of cinema" themselves. This has generally led to a different relationship with viewers, who are now more aware of what cinema has been able to offer and still offers, and therefore more willing to interpret the intentions of directors in their choice and treatment of content (stories, characters, events, etc.) and forms (styles, "film language", etc.) that are complex and often layered, beyond or beneath the surface of images and sounds.



Both *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, UK-US 1975) and The Story of My Wife/*A feleségem története* (Ildikó Enyedi, Hungary-Germany-France-Italy 2021) are divided into "chapters", each with a title, as if the director's intention were to signal to viewers that, as in a book, a story is being told, and that a well-defined sequence of events is therefore to be expected.

La La Land (Damien Chazelle, USA 2016) makes rather explicit references to classical Hollywood musicals from the 1930s, such as *Shall We Dance* (Mark Sandrich, USA 1937): compare the scene in the park with Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone with the one (at **1:10:25**), also in a park, with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. This type of reference is obviously only noticed (and appreciated) by the most "cinephile" viewers, and the director's intention will therefore only be partially understood.

4. The 'game' between director and audience

This invitation to recognise the director's presence behind the images, to pay attention to the "signals" or "clues" that the director, more or less consciously, has scattered throughout the film, thus leads viewers to speculate on what mental states led the director to make the choices he made, what he wanted his audience to understand and feel, and by what means, i.e. through what use of cinematic language, he succeeded (or failed) in his intent. Of course, not all the "clues" or "signals" left by the director are equally visible: some may be more explicit and point us towards fairly clear interpretations, while others may be more implicit and suggest meanings in a more indirect way. The director may have deliberately left these clues, but he may also have done so unconsciously, or he may not have been able to hide them ... This implies that viewers can be involved in "decoding" these signals at different levels of awareness, from simple feelings or impressions to more thoughtful reflection, to critical analysis that subjects the film to a more detailed and in-depth examination. And, as we have repeatedly emphasised, individual differences are crucial in this case too: depending

on one's prior knowledge and experience, the situation, mood, and the "commitment" with which each person approaches the cinematic experience, each viewer "works" at different levels (of awareness, depth, analysis, etc.) and thus arrives at personal hypotheses about the director's intentions in making a certain film in a certain way.

This process, by which viewers attribute particular intentions to the director, is neither automatic nor mechanical: on the contrary, just as we have emphasised the differences between viewers, we must also remember that directors differ from one another, both in terms of their own level of awareness and in terms of their (implicit or explicit) desire to stimulate their viewers to reflect on their films in some way. In short, the real intentions of directors, which are not always clearly expressed, should not be confused with the hypotheses made by viewers - and perhaps it is precisely in this continuous and inevitable "game" between director and audience that lies one of the most intriguing aspects of cinema as a rich and complex form of communication.

5. The different choices made by directors

"There are two types of directors: those who take the audience into account when conceiving and then making their films, and those who do not. For the former, cinema is a performing art; for the latter, it is an individual adventure." François Truffaut (Note 15)

Truffaut summarises the differences between directors in terms of their relationship with the audience, i.e. the viewers. A director may decide to cater as much as possible to what he believes to be the tastes of his/her target audience, meeting their expectations and creating a work that minimises ambiguity in interpretation. To do this, he uses clear and transparent cinematic language that conveys the meanings (and emotions) associated with the story and characters in a fluid and coherent manner. One way to achieve this is to adhere more or less radically to a *film genre*: the director will then use the "typical" forms and content of, for example, a western or a horror film, to allow viewers to make full use of their previous knowledge and experience of this genre of film. At the opposite extreme, a director of "experimental" films does not set out primarily to be "understandable", let alone to necessarily "appeal" to all his/her potential viewers: the concern to engage with the audience is secondary to the desire to create something new and unexpected, thus making the making of a film, first and foremost, an "individual adventure" (as Truffaut says) rather than a socially shared action. Of course, between these two extremes there are all kinds of intermediate situations, i.e. directors who try to balance the demands (especially commercial ones) of "entertainment" on the one hand, and their own aesthetic and cultural ambitions on the other - and this can also lead to the creation of films that seem to present both of these positions. Truffaut, who had such a clear distinction between these two types of filmmaking, undoubtedly considered Hitchcock to be a director who was very attentive to the needs and desires of the audience, but, as we have seen in the case of *Vertigo*, Hitchcock himself liked to include elements in his films that not all of his viewers would appreciate, let alone perceive or understand. In this sense, Hitchcock, as well as being a very popular director, was also an "auteur", in the sense that Truffaut and all his colleagues of the French *nouvelle vague* of the 1960s understood as the figure of the director, i.e. an artist with almost total control over his work, thus able to leave his unmistakable mark on it, regardless of recognition and appreciation by the audience.

Every director, therefore, can decide to make his intentions and choices more or less transparent and understandable to all or some of his potential viewers, reserving the right, if he wishes, to include elements that have meaning and emotional resonance *only for himself* (and which will not necessarily be made known or explained to the audience). It may also be the case that these elements are chosen

without full awareness: as a matter of fact, directors constantly draw on their personal experiences, conscious and unconscious, to make their film, just as every viewer uses what we often call their personal "baggage" of knowledge and experience to understand, interpret and ultimately appreciate (or not) that same film. As Miguel Gomes, director of *Tabou*, once said:

"I make all these choices on set, not before. But I understand them when I watch the film, not during filming. A little more during editing, but not in such a rational way. I just have a feeling that it's right, that it's good." (Note 16)

This reconfirms the subjective nature of a director's choices and intentions, who, even when communicating with viewers through his/her film, can decide, with greater or lesser awareness, to make aspects and elements of the film understandable and appreciable by everyone, by some, and even, in a "gratuitous" way, by no one in particular. This also reconfirms that the personal "baggage" of the director and that of each of his/her viewers can be shared, but gradually, on a continuum ranging from universal values that everyone potentially shares to the most personal idiosyncrasies. If, on the one hand, one could expect a director wanting his/her film to be understood thanks to knowledge and experiences shared by everyone or by many, on the other hand, one cannot limit free creative expression that does without this knowledge and experience. It would also be desirable for viewers to acquire as much knowledge and experience as possible, as this would greatly increase their ability to understand and appreciate each film and more diverse films - perhaps giving them the opportunity to discover that a certain film is a "good" film ...

6. The different "languages" spoken by cinema

Closely related to this discussion is the question of the "languages" that directors use in their work. We have seen that some of the elements or aspects of a film that are sometimes less "transparent" and more difficult (or less easy) to understand are *visual* in nature: the motif of the "spiral", which recurs several times in *Vertigo*, from the swirls in the opening credits to the woman's hairstyle, from the spiral staircases to the protagonist's vertigo, despite being explicitly staged several times, may not be grasped by viewers, at least not in the same way that they understand a dialogue between characters or a very familiar image or sound. This refers to the very nature of cinema, which is a multimedia tool that uses languages that are very different from each other: from the verbal to the visual and auditory, with a complex interrelation between the languages themselves provided by the staging, from what is directly visible ("on-screen") to what remains invisible even if presupposed (the "off-screen"), from the camera movements to the editing, from the use of special effects to the soundtrack. Not all of these "languages" are immediately understandable and interpretable by the audience: in particular, verbal language, which tends to clearly define its contents, is only part of the experience provided by a film, which offers a much broader and more nuanced range of messages. Just as it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to translate an entire film into a purely verbal description, even more difficult is using this same language to describe the intentions of the director we feel we have grasped while watching one of his films. The limitations of verbal language, which tends to be analytical, explicit, even "digital," are immediately evident when faced with the images and sounds conveyed by a film, which are often global, implicit, "analog," and which often refer not to individual, well-identified elements but to experiences, memories, knowledge, in the viewer's mind. Watching a film is an "experiential" fact, involving, far beyond the sensory channels of simple "sight" and simple "hearing," our deepest cognitive, affective, and motor mechanisms, our memory, our entire body being stimulated in all its richness and complexity. And it is precisely thanks to this complex experiential language, closely linked to the reality we experience as well as to the reality

that the film offers, that we are able to understand, interpret, and appreciate elements of a film that the use of verbal language alone would fail to capture.

Certainly all this takes on greater relevance in the face of those films which, as we have already discussed, include the result of directorial choices that are less immediately understandable by the audience, or which at least lend themselves to more than a single interpretation. *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* for example, could at first be considered simply (or just) a thriller: it tells the story of an excursion to a desert site by some girls from a girls' school in early twentieth-century Australia, during which some of them climb rocks, completely disappearing. As a thriller the film "works", although the mystery of this adventure is not revealed at all (which some viewers would consider a serious flaw for this film genre). But watching the film goes far beyond the events surrounding the story, which are all in all rather sparse, and even the least warned viewer notices that the numerous images of nature and the relationship the girls seem to have with these fascinating yet disturbing places seem to "mean" much more - or, in other words, that the director's intentions go well beyond simply telling the story of a disappearance. But, if this "story" can also be described analytically with verbal language, an effort is required to be able to identify the message conveyed by the richness and ambiguity of the images (which are also closely integrated with the "story" itself). We understand that these images call into question our sensory experience, both as human beings and as spectators - we are invited to make sense of what we see, but also to understand the emotions we contextually perceive.

Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, Australia 1975)

The images of the girls climbing to the top of the rock alternate with images of the landscape, both fascinating and menacing. The director's insistence on this sometimes even anthropomorphic nature insinuates a sense of mystery but also of almost metaphysical "horror". As spectators, we perceive these subtle sensations of attraction towards something unknown, as attractive as it is disturbing...

At one point the girls lie down in a clearing and fall asleep. Nature imposes itself again, with the image of a small snake crawling alongside the girls' bodies. The image of the teacher, looking up, towards the top of the rock (at **00:39**), is immediately juxtaposed with the image of a geometry text: what is the function of this sudden juxtaposition? The governess seems to interpret her vision of the rock with the use of a scientific image ... while immediately afterwards three of the four girls, on waking up, resume the climb, almost "in a trance". The fourth girl, frightened, comes down and her terrified scream fills the silence of the place. A more warned viewer will be able to sense that the director wanted to represent a theme dear to him (and which he will take up, at different levels, in his subsequent films): "the unsolvable conflict between culture (rational, prissy, oppressive) and nature (irrational, vitalistic, liberating)" (Note 17)

A film like *Picnic at Hangin Rock* therefore lends itself to many "interpretative paths" and at the same time raises many questions, at different levels of complexity. If it's a thriller, why aren't we given the solution to the intrigue? What's the function of the (almost obsessively exhibited) images of nature? Are they just a way to show us beautiful natural views? But in this case, why are they so numerous and incisive? Does the choice to set the film in early twentieth-century Australia, in a period still marked by colonialism, have any particular significance? And, if we know the director's subsequent films, such as *Dead Poets Society* (a melodrama about a charismatic teacher and his students) or *Green Card* (a "romantic" comedy with a happy ending), how can we interpret *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in light of the recurring motifs in his filmography? All legitimate questions, which not all viewers naturally ask, but which give an idea of the many ways in which a film can be "interrogated" and the many possible answers -answers that perhaps constitute just as many good reasons to judge a film as a "good" film ...

7. Between analogies and metaphors

The languages that cinema uses, not only to narrate stories and describe characters and environments, but also to suggest meanings and stimulate emotions, can therefore pass through the more or less sophisticated treatment of images and sounds, which by their very nature are evocative, that is, they can bring out in spectators diversified ideas and states of mind, depending on the predispositions and attitudes, as well as the knowledge and experiences, with which viewers themselves approach the cinematic experience. In this way the director's intentions are continuously reinterpreted, provided with meaning and value.

However, the use of cinematic languages can be more or less direct/indirect and more or less implicit/explicit, which entails a different commitment to perception and interpretation on the part of viewers. The use of *analogies*, for example, through which some images can suggest memory and comparison with other images stored in our minds, can be more or less easy, depending on the immediacy of the images and, of course, the knowledge that the viewer must activate. (Post) modern cinema often uses more or less explicit references to other films: for example, Quentin Tarantino's cinema is filled with "memories" of films, which the director (an inveterate cinephile) reuses and in a certain sense "recreates", often with satirical intent: a "war" film like *Inglorious basterds* or a "revisionist" western film like the already mentioned *Django Unchained* contain a variety of elements (especially formal and stylistic) that refer to Italian films from the 60s and 70s belonging to the same cinematic genres. It is certainly not essential to be aware of these "references" to appreciate Tarantino's films, but the more astute viewer will certainly have an extra chance to enjoy them.

Inglorious basterds *(*Quentin Tarantino, USA-Germany 2009)

The use of *metaphors*, through which two scenes are related to each other to stimulate comparison and thus enrich their understanding and interpretation, can also be more or less direct and explicit. If the two scenes are juxtaposed through editing, the effect can be captured quite easily even by viewers who are not particularly sensitive and warned. When Fritz Lang in *Fury* juxtaposes the image of a group of women with that of a chicken coop, the weight of gossip and chatter is immediately underlined; and when Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* juxtaposes the image of workers leaving the factory with that of a flock of sheep, the message of alienation and passivity to which the workers themselves are reduced is evident (especially if these images are related to the sarcastic caption that precedes them: "*'Modern times.' A story of industry, of individual enterprise - humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness."*

Fury (Fritz Lang, USA 1936)

Modern times (Charlie Chaplin, USA 1936)

This is a procedure that is not without possible criticism (for example, for those who believe that in this way the director's "hand" is all too evident, or that the "realism" of the scenes is endangered), but which even in more recent times directors/authors such as Woody Allen have not hesitated to use: in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the image of the protagonist's rival is compared to images of Mussolini and a donkey ...

Crimes and Misdemeanors (Woody Allen, USA 1989)

At other times the metaphor can be more subtle and involve not a single scene or sequence but an entire film. *The artist*, for example, tells the story of two Hollywood stars at a crucial moment in cinema, the transition from silent to sound in the late 1920s. But the film achieves this "reenactment" in a radical yet surprising way: the film is itself silent and respects to the letter all the conventions typical of those first decades of cinematic history: it is shot in a "square" format, in black and white and with intertitles inserted to explain the dialogues. The story focuses heavily (as it did, in a completely different vein, *Singin' in the Rain*) on the transition, for many dramatic actors, between silent and sound, with the protagonist stubbornly wanting to produce a silent film when this type of cinema is now running out of steam, and, on the contrary, the dancer at the beginning of her career and therefore projected towards the future. But the director does not focus so much on events and characters as on the portrait of a particular setting, described with nostalgia and affection. And viewers are drawn into this operation, which can be read as a metaphor for the decline of a world

that also evokes emotions of nostalgia and almost regret: as if nostalgia for a distant past corresponded with the nostalgia that all of us (or at least, many of us) have felt in at least partially similar situations. An on-screen past, then, that speaks to the audience's present. And the director seems to be playing with the challenges that such a film project continually poses to him, in an attempt to be able to shoot, in 2011, a film without words. Once again, the director's intentions (and emotions) can thus be mirrored in those of his viewers, called upon to share this adventure with him - and the *experience of this film* (for both director and audience) transcends the story told to take on a more universal value. As Pignocchi wrote, albeit about another film (the aforementioned *Tabou*) (Note 18):

"The question is not about the director artificially imposing technical limitations on himself, but about recreating some of the sensations that silent films can provide to today's viewers. First, they can prompt reflection on the virtues of economics: without dialogue, all our attention faculties focus on facial expressions, glances, and all those bodily elements that, more than words, are linked to emotions ... In a silent film, we are more receptive to the way the music dialogues with the story, and when the sound adheres precisely to the image, we almost have the impression of a miracle ..."

The artist (Michel Hazanavicius, France 2011)

8. Conclusion: Does analysis prevent "immersion" in a "good" film?

Some might argue that reflecting on a film, or analysing it in less or more detail, ends up damaging our immersion in the story told and the characters' experiences, jeopardizing our emotional involvement and ultimately affecting our appreciation and final judgment of the film. In reality, one could respond to this objection by stating that analysis and immersion are not two such separate and almost conflicting procedures. We have seen that becoming more aware of aspects and elements of a film that may not be so obvious at first glance can make our viewing experience richer, and in fact more engaging. Analysis and reflection can then serve to make the reasons for our interest and involvement more explicit and understandable - and this not only *during* viewing but also *after* viewing, when perhaps we happen to or decide to rewatch all or part of a film.

Finally, critical reflection, or, more simply, becoming more aware of aspects, elements, or motifs of a film, can take various forms and be conducted at various levels of detail and depth. Not everyone can or will want to conduct a critical analysis, but everyone may, depending also on the contexts and situations in which we watch a film, be led to ask questions about what the film (and its director) intend to make us understand and feel, and also, sometimes, to ask how the director managed to prompt these same questions, by what means and through which specific uses of cinematic language.

Ultimately, not everyone will want to make the effort to reflect on a film, but everyone should be allowed the freedom to do so. The concept of a "good movie" remains elusive, but if the impossible question *"What is a good movie?"* cannot lead to an absolute answer, we can still ask ourselves what

drives us to judge a film the way we do ... thereby reaffirming the right of every spectator to his/her own taste and to derive his/her own personal pleasure from a film.

Notes

1. Quoted from Genette G. 2014. *Epilogue*, Seuil, Paris, p.113, in Jullier L. 2021. *Qu'est-ce qu'un bon film?*, Armand Colin, Malakoff, p. 7.

2. Kaganski S. 2003. *Les Inrockuptibles*, n. 374. Quoted in Jullier, op. cit., p. 203.

3. For an introduction to the theory of causal attributions see, e.g. EBSCO Advantage Research Starters and Oxford Research Encyclopedias.

4. See Mariani L. 2025. Individual differences in cinema audiences, cinemafocus.eu

5.Quoted in *Il Mereghetti. Dizionario dei film*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano.

6. Victoria Oliver Farner, The Video Essay: "Sound & Sight & Time" on Notebook|MUBI.

7. Heller N. 2019. "James Gray's Journey from the Outer Boroughs to Outer Space", *The New Yorker*, September 19.

8. From a user revuew at IMDb. At the same site you can find a detailed guide to such "technical errors".

9. See e.g. Coegnarts M. & Kravanja P. (eds.) 2015. *Embodied cognition and cinema,* Leuven University Press, Leuven.

10. Jullier, op. cit. p. 136.

11. From a user review at IMDb.

12. See Mariani L. 2023. "Did they really live happily ever after?" Film endings and viewers' reactions, cinemafocus.eu

13. Wilde O. 1891. *The portrait of Dorian Gray*.

14. As reported in Jullier 2021, op. cit., pp. 178-180.

15. Truffaut F. 1975. *Les films de ma vie,* Flammarion, p. 104. Quoted in Pignocchi A. 2015. *Pourquoi aime-t-on un film? Quand les sciences cognitives discutent des gouts et des couleurs*, Odile Jacob, Paris, p. 191.

16. Quoted in Pignocchi, op. cit., p. 263.

17. *Il Mereghetti, Dizionario dei film.* Baldini e Castoldi, Milano.

18. Quoted in Pignocchi, op. cit., p. 294.