

Cambridge University Press

052181328X - Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Per Persson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

UNDERSTANDING CINEMA

A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Understanding Cinema analyzes the moving imagery of film and television from a psychological perspective. Per Persson argues that spectators perceive, think, apply knowledge, infer, interpret, feel, and make use of knowledge, assumptions, expectations, and prejudices when viewing and making sense of film. Drawing on the methods of psychology and anthropology, he explains how close-ups, editing conventions, character psychology and other cinematic techniques work, and how and why they affect the spectator. This study integrates psychological and culturalist approaches to meaning and reception in new ways, anchoring the discussion in concrete examples from early and contemporary cinema. *Understanding Cinema* also examines the design of cinema conventions and their stylistic transformations through the evolution of film.

Per Persson is currently researcher at the Nokia Research Center, Helsinki.

Cambridge University Press

052181328X - Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Per Persson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Understanding Cinema

A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Per Persson



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
052181328X - Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery
Per Persson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Per Persson 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Palatino 9.75/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

ISBN 0 521 81328 x hardback

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Understanding and Dispositions	1
Psychology: Understanding and Dispositions	6
Parameters of Dispositions	13
A Psychological Model of Reception	19
Discourse and Meaning	21
Level 0	26
Level 1	28
Level 2	29
Level 3	30
Level 4	32
Level 5	33
Some Specifications of the Model	34
Conclusions	43
2 Understanding Point-of-View Editing	46
Historical Context of Point-of-View Editing	48
Early Point-of-View as Attraction – Not as Spatial Articulation	50
Spatial Immersion Begins	52
Editing between Adjacent Places: Movement	54
Editing between Adjacent Places: Gazing	56
Functions of Point-of-View Editing	63
Deictic Gaze	66
The Structure of Deictic-Gaze Behavior	67
Development	68

vi	Contents
	Functions 70
	Universality and the Question of Origin 72
	How Does Point-of-View Editing Work? 74
	Eight Hypotheses 75
	Conclusions 92
	Explaining the Presence of the Point-of-View Convention in Mainstream Cinema 97
3	Variable Framing and Personal Space 101
	Personal Space 102
	Personal-Space Invasions 105
	Personal-Space Behavior: A Vehicle for Communication 108
	Conclusions 108
	Visual Media and Personal Space 109
	Personal Space and Variable Framing 110
	Early Cinema 110
	Threatening Imagery of Early Cinema 113
	Emblematic Shots: Marks of Intimacy and Emotional Repose 118
	Variable Framing in Mainstream Narrative Cinema 121
	“Closer-ups” 121
	Analytical Editing: Exploiting Personal-Space Intimacy 127
	The Important Foreground 130
	Threat Revisited 131
	Voyeurism 138
	Conclusions 141
4	Character Psychology and Mental Attribution 143
	Introduction 143
	Textual Theories of Characters 144
	Reception-Based Theories of Characters 146
	The Psychology of Recognition and Alignment 149
	Levels of Meaning 150
	Level 0 152
	Level 1 152
	Level 2 152
	Level 3 152
	Level 4 153
	Level 5 153
	Level 6 154
	Why Mental States? 158
	“Subjective Access” versus “Mental Attribution” 158

Contents	vii
Mental Attribution in Everyday Life	159
Ability with Body and Gesture Cues	159
Folk Psychology: Reasoning about Mental States	161
The Mind and Its Parts	163
Emotions and Their Causes	169
Deep Psychology	173
Additional Remarks	173
Folk Psychology is a Cultural Understanding	174
People with Different Folk Psychologies	176
Relativism versus Universality	177
Anthropomorphism: Intentional Stance and Psychological Causality	178
Instrumental Value of Folk Psychology	181
Folk Psychology = Normality	181
Mental Attribution Processes in Reception of Cinema	182
Some General Principles	183
The Minds of Cinematic Characters	186
Goals Bring Coherence to Events	186
Emotions are Important Motivators for Goals and Actions	192
Perceptions Inform Beliefs that Constrain Goals and Actions	193
The Emotions of Cinematic Characters	201
Positive/Negative Emotions	202
Surprise	204
Events Caused by Circumstance, Other, or Self	206
Appetitive/Aversive Emotions	209
Certain/Uncertain Events	210
Low/High Control Potential	211
Additional Remarks	211
Intradiegetic Attributions	211
Mental Attributions and Time	213
What is a Round/Flat Character?	216
Narrative Causality is Primarily a Psychological Causality	217
Text and Mental Attribution	220
Textual Techniques	220
Acting versus Situation	221
Creating Psychologically Rich Situations	222
Nonarbitrary Conventions	231
Good/Bad Conventions	232

Cambridge University Press

052181328X - Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Per Persson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	Contents
	The Narrativization and Psychologization of Early Cinema 232
	Psychology as Complement? 236
	Concluding Comments 242
5	The Case for a Psychological Theory of Cinema 247
	<i>Notes</i> 251
	<i>References</i> 261
	<i>Index</i> 277

List of Illustrations

1	Meaning emerges from understanding.	page 24
2	Some gestalt effects of perceptual organization.	27
3	<i>Komposition in Blau</i> (1935).	35
4	Levels of coherence and their interaction.	37
5	Understanding visual discourse affects the structure of dispositions.	39
6	<i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> (1912).	51
7	<i>Le Chien de Montargis</i> (1909).	55
8	<i>The Musketeers of Pig Alley</i> (1912).	58
9	The filming of a studio interior scene from <i>Vor Tids Dame</i> (1912) at the Nordisk studio in Copenhagen.	59
10	<i>The Egyptian Mummy</i> (1914).	60
11	<i>Ladies' Skirts Nailed to a Fence</i> (1900).	61
12	<i>Easy Street</i> (1917).	61
13	<i>Le Voyage dans la lune</i> (1902).	63
14	<i>Rear Window</i> (1954).	77
15	<i>The Lady and the Mouse</i> (1913).	89
16	<i>The Man With a Movie Camera</i> (1929).	93
17	<i>The Salvation Army Lass</i> (1908).	95
18	Surreal POV in <i>Un chien Andalou</i> (1929).	96
19	<i>The Great Train Robbery</i> (1903).	111
20	<i>L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat</i> (1895–6).	113
21	<i>How It Feels to Be Run Over</i> (1900).	114
22	<i>The Big Swallow</i> (1900).	114
23	<i>The Great Train Robbery</i> (1903).	115
24	The Müller–Lyer illusion.	116
25	Title unknown (1904).	118
26	<i>Bangville Police</i> (Keystone, 1913).	119
27	<i>Le Chien de Montargis</i> (1909).	120

28	<i>Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari</i> (1920).	123
29	<i>The Egyptian Mummy</i> (1914).	124
30	<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922).	127
31	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941).	129
32	Unknown (1904).	132
33	<i>Die Hard</i> (1988).	133
34	<i>Psycho</i> (1960).	134
35	<i>Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter</i> (1984).	135
36	<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922).	136
37	Promotional poster for <i>House of Wax</i> (1953).	137
38	<i>Sommaren med Monika</i> (1953).	140
39	<i>Seven Samurai</i> (1954).	151
40	The Western model of the mind.	164
41	Model of appraisal parameters.	170
42	<i>Die Hard</i> (1988).	194
43	<i>North by Northwest</i> (1959).	195
44	<i>Seven Samurai</i> (1954).	196
45	<i>Steamboat Bill, Jr.</i> (1928).	197
46	<i>Der Letzte Mann</i> (1924).	199
47	<i>Rear Window</i> (1954).	200
48	<i>The Big Parade</i> (1925).	208
49	<i>Die Hard</i> (1988).	213
50	<i>Die Hard</i> (1988).	215
51	<i>Die Hard</i> (1988).	230
52	<i>The Great Train Robbery</i> (1903).	235

Preface and Acknowledgments

A number of people have contributed to this project. Although I have exposed my supervisor, Jan Olsson, to many long and tedious texts over the years, he has patiently endured and given fast feedback in the intelligent and verbally equilibristic way that is only his. In the same spirit, many fellow students and teachers at the colloquium in the Department of Cinema Studies, Stockholm University, have given me constructive criticism when it was best needed. I would like to express my thanks to David Bordwell, who took the time to read and comment on some of my draft chapters and inspired me academically with his lectures and professionalism. David Modjeska's meticulous revision of my English provided invaluable help, and his corrections often led to clarifications of content. Younghee Jung and my brother, Ola Persson, delicately provided the form and layout of the book. Maxime Fleckner Ducey granted me access to the archives of Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, from which most of the photographic material in this book originates. The staff at the Department of Cinema Studies helped me with technical and economical matters all through the project. The Sweden–America Foundation allowed me the financial means to stay abroad for a year. Additional funding was provided for by Holger och Thyra Lauritzens Stiftelse, Wallenbergsstiftelsens Jubileumsfond, Run-Jannes Stipendium, and the Swedish Institute of Computer Science. I would also like to express my gratitude to all people at the HUMLE lab at the Swedish Institute of Computer Science for their generous support and constructive discussions. In particular, Kristina Höök's persistent encouragement – economically, academically, and personally – took me through many of the dark labyrinths that all projects of this nature eventually always run into. Finally, I thank Ewa Björnsson and Jonny Persson, my mother and father. If it were not for their joint support, constructive encouragement, and unconditional love all through the years, this study would simply not exist.

Cambridge University Press

052181328X - Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery

Per Persson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Understanding Cinema

A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery