

Interview

Kristin Thompson

The Cine-Files: What is at stake in close reading?

Kristin Thompson: To begin with, I don't use the phrase "close reading." I prefer "close analysis." The notion of close reading is presumably a holdover from the 1970s and 1980s, when semiotics was a popular approach in film studies. Cinematic technique was thought to be closely comparable to a language, with coded units and grammar. Although there are some comparisons to be made between the techniques of cinema and a language, I don't think the similarities can be taken very far.

"Reading" to me implies that interpretation is one's main goal in looking closely at a film. I usually use interpretation as part of analysis, but it is seldom my main goal. Analysis, loosely speaking, to me means noting patterns in the relationship of the individual devices in a film (devices being techniques of style and form) to each other and figuring out why those patterns are there. What purposes do they serve?

What is at stake in close analysis depends on what sort of analysis one is doing. I'm assuming here that the subject is scholarly or semi-scholarly analysis intended for publication. My own purposes for analysis fall into at least these categories:

1. The simplest reason to analyze a film would be to find out more about it because it's appealing or intriguing. I've written essays on Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* and *Play Time*, in both cases because I admired them and wanted to be able to understand and appreciate them better. I go on the simple assumption that we can only be entertained and moved by films to the degree that we notice things in them. Complex films can't be thoroughly comprehended on a single viewing or even several viewings projected on a screen.

2. One might analyze a film in order to answer a question, often to do with the nature of cinema in general. My essay on "Duplicitous Narration and *Stage Fright*," as the title suggests, arose more from my interest in a particular, unusual devise, the "lying flashback," than from a particular admiration for the film. (All three essays mentioned here are in my *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton University Press, 1988.)

3. To make a case that a film is significant and suggest why others should pay attention to it. One example would be the rediscovery over the past few years of Alberto Capellani's French and Hollywood silent films. On David Bordwell's and my blog, "Observations on Film Art," I posted two entries "Capellani ritrovato" and "Caellani trionfante" analyzing some scenes to support the claim that Capellani was one of the most important stylists and innovators of the era from 1905 to 1914.

A very different case came with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by Peter Jackson. I had written a book, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2007), primarily on the marketing and merchandising surrounding the film and on its many influences. I would not claim Jackson's film to be a masterpiece, but there was such a great backlash against it, mostly by literary scholars of Tolkien, that I thought it might be worth counterbalancing their opinions with a modest defense of the film as containing some excellent passages and effective decisions concerning the adaptation process. I wrote "Stepping out of Blockbuster Mode: The Lighting of the Beacons in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003)," (in Tom Brown and James Walters, eds., *Film Moments*, the British Film Institute, 2010) and "Gollum Talks to Himself: Problems and Solutions in Peter Jackson's Film Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*" (In Janice M. Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny, eds. *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*, McFarland, 2011).

4. Close analysis can be vital for writing about film history.

For example, David and I have studied films closely to determine what the stylistic and narrative norms are for a given period and place and what films were innovative in relation to those norms. Rather than examining a single film closely, such an approach involves analyzing multiple films to find commonalities and divergences. David has done this sort of work on norms in studying modern Hong Kong cinema (*Planet Hong Kong*, Harvard University Press, 2000; second edition available online at *Observations on Film Art*).

Another such project was my *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Harvard University Press, 1999). There had been many claims in academic and journalistic writings that the norms of Hollywood storytelling had declined after the end of the studio era and that we were now in a post-classical era. Such claims didn't tally with what I was seeing in the best Hollywood films, the ones held up as models within the industry. I did case studies of ten such films, dating from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, going through each scene by scene. I showed how classical techniques like protagonists' goals, dangling causes, dialogue hooks, redundant motivation, and other traditional norms were still pervasive in modern Hollywood. I chose the ten films because I liked them, but others would have made my point equally well.

TCF: Please tell us about something that couldn't be understood without a frame-by-frame attention to detail.

KT: I don't think most close analysis goes to the minute detail of examining a film frame by frame.

Sometimes it's necessary, especially with French and Soviet films of the 1920s or with some experimental work. There can be lots of ways of looking closely at the parts of a film and relating them to other parts.

Take a simple example, there are eleven shots across the length of *Late Spring* that include a sewing machine off to one side of the frame. (I wrote about the film in "Late Spring and Ozu's Unreasonable Style," in *Breaking the Glass Armor*) No two of these shots are the same, though they often are only small variations on each other, with the machine closer or further from the camera, sometimes on the left, sometimes the right, and so on. The series culminates late in the film, after the daughter has married and left her widowed father living alone. We see a similar framing along a corridor, and the space formerly occupied by the sewing machine is empty.

The daughter doesn't use this sewing machine in the course of the action, and no one mentions it. Many viewers probably vaguely notice that there is a sewing machine in the house. A few may notice its eventual absence late in the film. But even someone who watches the film over and over and at some point notices that there is a meaningful pattern of the sewing-machine shots would not be able to describe it. I suspected that the sewing-machine shots were small variations on each other, but were there some repetitions? How many were there? I was only able to get a good understanding of how the motif worked by photographing all twelve shots and comparing them side by side—and having the luxury to reproduce all twelve frame enlargements in my book.

What point is there in analyzing such a motif in detail? If we admire Claude Monet for taking infinite trouble to capture tiny changes of light on haystacks or lily-ponds, why not devote the same respect to one of the cinema's greatest directors? To go back to my point at the beginning, we can only appreciate a film to the extent that we notice things about it. I take it that the critic's job is to notice such things and point them out for the enrichment of others who don't have the time or inclination to do close analysis.

TCF: How do digital technologies allow us to engage in "direct" criticism that bypasses traditional written criticism?

KT: One obvious answer is that digital technologies allow anything that could be published in printed form to be offered online. Whether written for consumption via the internet or already published and then scanned to be posted, online criticism offers some obvious advantages (no lag in publication time, no need to hunt for a press) and disadvantages (no real guarantee of long-term survival, often no academic reward for publishing through a non-refereed process). David Bordwell and I have posted many entries involving close analysis on our blog. (I discuss the history and approach of *Observations on Film Art* in an essay for the first issue of the online journal, *Frames Cinema Journal*: "Not in Print: Two Film Scholars on the Internet.")

Perhaps more interesting is the question of what critical tools digital technologies offer for analysis itself. In past decades, David and I had to rig up elaborate camera-and-bellows systems to photograph frames from prints of films—as well as to travel far and depend on the hospitality of archivists to gain access to those prints.

Nowadays DVDs and Blu-rays bring hitherto rare films to the critic, and readily available players and apps allow for relatively easy capture of frames for illustration purposes. If the essay or book based on close analysis using such tools is to go online, it also becomes practical to reproduce a great many more frames as illustrations than would be possible in a print publication.

The possibility of using short clips as illustrations is very promising, especially once electronic textbooks get past the trial stages. (I made a modest contribution to the use of clips as examples for introductory students with “Elliptical Editing in *Vagabond*,”; this was done with the cooperation of the Criterion Collection and posted by them on YouTube in 2012.) Video essays analyzing films are still a new format but show great potential. Their usefulness will depend on how the issue of copyright plays out. At this point, I’m hopeful that showing clips as part of an analytical study will become established as fair use, as clearly it should be. Being able to use moving images complete with sound as well as still frames from films will be an extraordinarily useful tool.

I hope critics using digital tools for analysis will take the trouble to create analyses as complex as one can achieve through description in printed prose. This would mean editing together stills and short segments from across a film, recording voiceover comments, adding graphics where useful, and so on. Close analysis of this type will always be a labor-intensive process.

In 1977, **Kristin Thompson** received her Ph.D. in cinema studies from the Department of Communications Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she has been an Honorary Fellow since 1982. She has published eleven books on film, most recently *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2007) and, with David Bordwell, *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). Bordwell and Thompson’s textbook, *Film Art: An Introduction*, is currently in its tenth edition (McGraw-Hill). They maintain a blog, *Observations on Film Art* . She is also an Egyptologist and has worked for eleven seasons at Tell el-Amarna, registering, studying, and publishing on statuary fragments .