

On the Evolution of Film Theory and Aesthetics

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In 1933 film theorist and psychologist Rudolph Arnheim wrote a book called *Film* that was added to and re-released in 1957 with the title *Film as Art*.¹ This book with which most serious film theorists are familiar. One section of the book is called “The Complete Film.”

In that section, Arnheim argues that technological advances in the film—explicitly the additions of sound and color (and he worries about the advent of the three-dimensional film and the widescreen)—will be responsible for robbing film of its capacity as a medium to be used for the creation of art. “*The complete film*” represents an idealization of a film as thoroughly convincing as a full expression of reality. This, Arnheim claims, is the end of the film as an art form; the expression of reality, fully informed as reality, is not art. As the film moves toward this full expression of reality, Arnheim worries that editing styles like montage and cinematic techniques like changing camera angles will be abandoned. Moreover, Arnheim believed progress toward “the complete film” was inevitable.

Today, “going to the movies” as a class of events is evolving, and, as a case of punctuated equilibrium, it is right now evolving quite fast. The expression “movie,” upon reflection, is anachronistic. “Movie” accurately reflected our fascination in 1895 with photographs that moved like real life. We likely all recall the short film of a train pulling into a station—*L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*—shot by the Lumiere brothers, unedited (no editing much less montage) and with an unmoving camera. The film was a capture of an actual event, recording realistically. “Talkie,” an expression evoking nostalgia at this point, reflected our fascination with the advent of sound in our (narrative) films starting in 1927. Even the expression “film” seems anachronistic today as the creation of moving pictures by capturing individual photographs on a reel of celluloid is not “industry standard” any longer. However, the most significant event affecting movies today is the shift from the cinema to the home. On December 10, 2020, the Walt Disney Company, at an Investors Day Event, announced massive plans to move an enormous number of planned theatrical projects either away from cinema release to their home streaming service, Disney Plus, or simultaneous release both in cinemas and on streaming. Disney stock prices the next day jumped almost fourteen percent as investors realized that with that announcement, Disney had substantively and likely irrevocably changed the film landscape forever.

I would like to explore what this change means or may mean for the film as an art form. The implications for the film as an aesthetic vehicle may be substantial, and changes to the film industry may have strong implications for the artform itself. Let us first consider the possible aesthetic changes; then, let us consider likely relevant contextualist changes.

The Aesthetics

When one visually experiences a movie in a cinema, several features are common to this experience. First, the theater is usually very dark. Some signage and some directional floor lighting may be on, but otherwise, the theater is dark. This idea has the effect of concentrating vision on the field of the screen, eliminating visual distraction, enhancing the picture’s brightness, and consequently intensifying the colors. Darkness also requires that the picture be as transparent as possible since the focus is intensified. Second, the picture is usually extensive, usually as large as

the available screen. It has been expected for some cinema theaters to become smaller in recent years as larger theaters—IMAX being perhaps the best example—grew in size. Despite this, and even though home televisions and projection systems seem to be growing increasingly more prominent as both technology and taste for such size have grown, cinematic screens are traditionally giant compared to home screens. The effect of large screens at the cinema has meant that pictures must be as straightforward as possible. There can be no unintentional blurriness or soft focus. The picture must be very crisp.

Home screens have undergone more growth in picture clarity than cinematic screens that were already as sharp as technology—available in general and available in the cinema in question—allowed and audiences at least tacitly demanded. Home televisions have gone to “4k” and “8k” and the Blu-ray format—that because of its use of shorter-wave blue/violet lasers as compared with the standard longer-wave red laser used to read DVDs—has allowed televisions capable of sharper pictures with greater clarity and intensity to actualize more of their potential.

Despite this, however, the clarity one can achieve on a home screen will always be limited to the “lowest common denominator” of one’s equipment. For instance, even if television is “8k”—which is to say that it produces a picture composed of almost 8000 pixels in width—if one only has a component that receives and sends to that television a 1080p picture (which is to say, standard high-definition)—that has only 1920 pixels in width—the picture is only going to possess the lower level of clarity. This notion has meant for most of us satisfaction with a home picture that is typically less crisp and clear than we see at a cinema, satisfaction based on an appreciation of the speed of gaining clarity as the technology of home screens has increased, but also satisfaction based on an acceptance of the limits of our resources for acquiring the latest technology as it is released. The evolution of going to cinemas to see a movie to watching a film at home may mean that we are, in general, seeing pictures that are less clear than we otherwise would, but just as importantly, being comfortable with that and accepting it as standard.

In homes without dedicated theater rooms, it is common to have televisions placed in rooms where we balance the quality of sight-lines from seating spaces to the television with the practicalities and the aesthetic qualities of furniture placement as it fills the space. This notion almost certainly entails that some will have better views than others, not only because some will be closer to the television or have more direct-on sight-lines, but because those further away or more at an angle will be forced to view a screen that is designed to provide a high-quality picture only to those with optimal sight-lines. Even if homes are increasingly incorporating dedicated theater rooms, these rooms are a decided luxury that requires the resources to have the house-space for such a room and the resources to furnish the room with appropriate technology—“appropriate” technology, not necessarily the latest technology.

Again, this contributes to an acceptance by home viewers of a picture that may not be comparable to the quality found at the cinema. In homes without expansive and dedicated theater rooms, the chances are high that the sound people hear as they experience movies in their homes will be very different from what people might have heard at the cinema. At the cinema, the theater’s space usually allows for sound resonance and directionality not available in living rooms or family rooms. Home rooms do not have the volume necessary for high-quality resonance, and even though every theater has “sweet spots” where the sound directionality is optimal, and even though some attention to creating that same context can be had in a home setting, the norm is that we place televisions and sound systems where we can—where they will fit and look good—and this limits optimizing sound directionality even for one person much less all those who may be in the room listening to the film.

The surround sound systems we find familiar in cinema theaters are replicated in homes with varying degrees of success, usually far below the quality available at the cinema. One can hope that the speakers built into the television will be sufficient; one can purchase a soundbar or sound

system in general that will not only amplify and clarify the sound but “suggest” that sound is coming from different parts of the room; one can purchase speakers for placement around the television viewing room that communicate with the component sending out the movie signals by Bluetooth or some other “air-based” system, or one can wire one’s television viewing room so that speakers may be placed in ways that surround hearers. All but the first of these approaches require resources and effort to achieve. Furthermore, as I mentioned above, even if one has the ability and undertakes the effort at wiring speakers around a room—to eliminate even the faintest of “hiss” that is common with all “air-based” sound systems—only a select subset of hearers will be placed to experience the sound as realistically surrounding. This notion can be very different from a cinema theater where, though there are “sweet spots,” most hearers will experience a more realistic feeling surrounding sound. This cause is less an indictment of the evolution than a prognostication that as streaming overtakes cinema-attendance, our audio aesthetic expectations will evolve in tandem, and we will come to accept a different sort—and sadly likely a different quality—of audio experience.

The film is usually described in terms of sight and sound. While there are movies or movie-like experiences that incorporate or experiment with incorporating other sensory engagement—one might think of Disney attraction experiences that utilize screens that wrap around viewers, that include the release of various scents, and that present tactile expression as seats move, things from beneath seats emerge, bubbles pop on one’s face, and water and air are sprayed in one’s face—sight and sound likely will continue to be the standard sensory modalities of film experiences. (Until perhaps virtual reality replaces film entirely.)

Despite this, the involvement of other sensory modalities as contextual components of one’s cinema-going experience is still widespread. When one sits in a theater, whether in a standard seat or one of the reclining seats populating many American cinemas today, the feel of the fabric, the kinesthetic sense of being upright or inclined, the boundaries of the armrests, the hardness or perhaps stickiness of the floors—all these factors frame the tactile experience one has in a cinema that likely will be a contrast to what one experiences watching a movie at home. No matter how hard manufacturers work to mimic the taste of cinema popcorn, I have yet to find anything that tastes the same. Cinema popcorn—I refer to the standard American salty variety—has a decadent buttery taste that feels indulgent and would likely encourage guilt in health-conscious people if they reflect on what they are eating. The sweet British style might do the same. Popcorn is the iconic cinema snack, but carbonated beverages, a vast array of candy—some tied to cinemas—as well, nowadays, of hotdogs, pizza, nachos, are all part of the taste available the cinema audience member, at least the American one. Add to this list alcohol for the British audience member. While these tastes are not essential components of watching a movie’s aesthetic experience, they can figure heavily in such experiences.

Moreover, that, of course, leads into the olfactory. Every cinema experience includes the fragrances of all these available foods, and it has become more commonplace for cinemas attempting to capture new and niche markets to include still more and substantial foods, all of which have odors that permeate the closed space of the theater, mainly with the effect that those without consumables will be inclined to seek them out.

The “feels,” tastes, and smells at home will be different. Not necessarily better or worse, but very likely different. Home furniture will feel different; the floor likely will not be sticky. Foods made to be enjoyed while watching movies at home will be less plural, so the associated smells will be more limited and less overwhelming. In addition, one can control the temperature at home by adjusting the air conditioning, heating, or opening or closing windows; something is unavailable at the cinema. In these respects, while the aesthetics attendant to sight and sound may diminish in quality in the evolution from the cinema to streaming, the contextual sensory engagements may be aesthetically enhanced—all perhaps except that decadent popcorn.

More basically than all, this is the notion that when one experiences a movie at a cinema, the experience surrounds and envelopes the audience member. This idea is the case even when the sensory modalities are limited to just two. One cannot pause a cinematic experience; one cannot quickly depart one's seat; one cannot see anything beyond perhaps the exit signs; one cannot hear anything but the movie soundtrack. This enveloping is essentially a central characteristic of the aesthetic of the cinematic experience. Again, unless one has a home theater where the cinematic experience can be substantially replicated, the chances are very high that this enveloping character will be absent. This loss is perhaps the most significant in terms of the overall aesthetic experience. As the formal aesthetic properties and closely related contextual matters alter, the character of the aesthetic experience also alters. Aspects both good and bad, aesthetically speaking, will soften and be less intense in the home experience. The continuity with the ordinary and everyday life will increase, and the "specialness" that experiences colored with the aesthetic aspects indicative of the cinematic experience will decrease.

Community

When one "goes to the movies," one typically experiences community in two different ways. First is the community of strangers who occupy the theater with you; second is the community of those friends and family attending the movie with you. Attending a movie in an empty theatre is something some of us enjoy; some even plan our viewing occasions to maximize the possibility of this occurring. Attending a movie where everyone is shoulder to shoulder may not be as inviting a prospect, but there is a definite charm to that experience as well. The former is preferred in part by those who want to optimize attention on the film, who want the context that encourages such exclusive focus to be as pure as possible, with the most significant limitation on the chances for interruption of any sort.

The latter is experientially valuable because it enhances those aspects of being in a community that such an audience-focused experience has. Other people in a theater add to the emotional response one has to a film as they feel the same and express reactions—gasps, laughs, shouts—in concert with the reactions one has. This intensification is freeing; it is like screaming on a roller coaster. One feels free to laugh out loud or audibly gasp, as others do the same.

Of course, this dynamic can backfire if someone in the audience is not in sync with their film reactions. In Martin Scorsese's 1991 remake of *Cape Fear*, the antagonist Max Cady—played by Robert de Niro—laughs loudly and obnoxiously during a movie. The fun of watching a film intensifies intensely the discomfort of watching someone watch a film badly; this is undoubtedly part of the genius of that scene. The positive community dynamic can also be interrupted if a plurality of movie-watching cultures in the theater. Some serious film viewers regard eating as anathema to creating a film with respect it deserves (of course, this applies only when the film in question does deserve respect). If these viewers are mixed with the sort who find movie watching incomplete without popcorn, raisinets, and a coke, the former will find their enjoyment diluted. Some film viewers regard silence as the only appropriate mode for watching movies; others feel free to speak back or audibly advise characters on the screen. The mixture of these two groups is less than ideal.

There is likely no better example of community ethos in film viewing than the phenomenon that arose around the (Jim Sharman 1975) *Rocky Horror Picture Show* experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Talking back to the screen was not only acceptable but was a sign that one was not "virginal" in one is watching the film; the audience ultimately was almost as scripted as the characters on the screen—and eventually, the characters acting out the film on the stage in front of the screen. In addition, it was common for audience members to bring a range of "props" to throw, light, squirt, and so on as the film progressed. Theaters were huge messes after a showing, but audiences delighted in the experience, and many repeated the midnight experience every

weekend for months on end. This delight was occasioned only because of community spirit, shared expectations, and participation.

Some people enjoy attending a movie on our own. We may be making a study of a film—vocationally or avocationally—and with a film that rewards attention, where audience members are as invisible as possible, being on one’s own is not only acceptable, it may be helpful. However, this is the exception rather than the rule. As with enjoying a meal out, we were enjoying a film is usually better when one attends with friends. Part of the reason for this I discuss below; part of the reason is the community aspect of attending with others. With others, one has someone with whom to chat before entering the theater; one has someone to share snacks; and perhaps more importantly, someone with whom to compare similar experiences after the movie has ended. This notion is a slightly different dynamic than discussing the film at the water cooler the next day; that discussion likely will only focus on the film itself rather than the broader, inclusive context of the experience of watching the film with another. When you go with a friend or friends, you are attending at the same time of day, as members of the same audience, likely eating (or not eating) the same things, with the same size screen and sound system, in the same room with the same seats and the same smells. This more richly contextualized experience lends itself to a potentially much richer conversation focused on the film and informed by that shared context.

The Contextualized Experience

The cinematic experience of watching a movie does not start when the movie begins. It starts much earlier. One first must decide which film to watch, where to watch it, what time to watch it, and then one must recruit one’s friends. One then must get ready and travel to the cinema. One must wait in line to purchase a ticket (if one did not do so in the more typical electronic fashion today), one must wait in line to purchase snacks, and one must wait in line, on benches, or leaning against walls to enter the theater. One then must find one’s seat or a seat. Then one waits. When the screen lights up, it is still many minutes before the movie begins. Adverts, previews, and trailers are next, and only after all of this do the lights finally dim, and the actual film begins.

After the film is over, one must decide when to leave the theater—try to be first out? Wait for the initial crowd to dissipate? Wait until after all the credits have crawled up the screen and the lights have come back on? Then there is the walk through the cinema and then out to one’s car or the subway. Moreover, this may still not be the end of the experience.

If it is the end of the experience, it comes with discernable chapters, a clear beginning, middle, and end, in the style of John Dewey’s description of the aesthetic experience, what he calls “*an* experience,” where there is a pronounced narrative arc and one remembers the experience as bounded, focused, and possessing an internal consistency that pervades the whole experience.²

To take the cinematic watching of a film to consist merely in the watching of the film is not to do justice to the presence and strength of the contextualities that are endemic to the whole experience. This idea is markedly different from a movie experience at home through a streaming service (or of a DVD, for that matter). That experience will not have such a pronounced or memorable context if it has much of one at all. The experience at home tends to begin only briefly before one press “play” on the remote control and given the ease with which one can pause a film at home to make dinner, answer a phone call, check email, that experience is almost certain to lack the rich structure or content of the whole cinematic experience.

I said above that my description of the cinematic experience might not be complete as far as I took it. It is common for cinematic viewing experiences to be coupled or joined with other experiences involving meals at restaurants or drinks at pubs. Those experiences may be stand-alone experiences, aesthetically, but if they are, in fact, aesthetic experiences, these added adjacent experiences enrich the movie-watching experience by aesthetically “book-ending” it (at least on one side or the other).

Experimentation

When one decides to pursue a cinematic experience, one must be content to accept the limitations of choices that are bound not only by what happens to be playing at a cinema one is willing to travel to but also what is playing at times one wants to watch a film and what one's companions wish to see. It is common for folks to scroll through dozens and dozens of films when picking something to watch at home, and it is not uncommon for a plurality of folks at home to depart for various rooms in the house to watch what they as individuals want to watch. The streaming choices are gigantic, and they are growing by leaps daily.

Not only are films available, but a vast assortment of other viewing possibilities may compete for one's viewing attention. Not so with a cinematic experience where the only thing on offer is a movie, bounded within an hour and a half's viewing time to perhaps as much as three and a half hours (thinking of Ingmar Bergman's theatrical release of his 1982 *Fanny and Alexander*).

If one chooses to "walk away" from a film at home, one only needs to press the remote's stop button. However, if one chooses to walk out of a film in a cinema, one must reckon with

1. The disruption of getting up and stumbling over other audience members,
2. The investment of time and money,
3. Furthermore, whether one is willing to ask one's companions to follow one's sensibilities and lead (which may have been preceded by a whispered discussion in the theater at which other audience members may have expressed displeasure).

Many people choose to stay put rather than run this gauntlet. Occasionally that "forced" continued investment pays off. I had met more people than not who felt they needed a plurality of encounters with Federico Fellini's 1963 *8 1/2* before they finally came to appreciate it. Their investment was a pure act of will, or it was an occasion where, at least on the first viewing, they decided that the better part of valor—regarding sticking it out in a cinematic theater—was the discretion of staying put for the entire run of two and half hours. In hindsight, they may have been happy with their choice. Watching a movie at a cinema comes with risks that do not typically accompany watching a film at home.

These risks may involve pushing one into a level of experimentation that has the potential to pay off in unexpectedly positive experiences of films, or filmmakers, or even in particular forms of film. Experimentation may be available as one scrolls through hundreds of choices at home, but there is no real risk in making one's choice, and so without such risk, the aesthetic investment one might choose to make may be limited. That is, one might invest a total of two and a half hours at a cinema but only invest ten minutes at home. Moreover, with that lack of investment may come a correlated lack of discovery of the new and different.

Artists

Not everyone remains in a theater to watch a movie's credits. The Marvel Comics films (or *Marvel Cinematic Universe*) have encouraged remaining as they include provocative teasers of the following films to come as scenes embedded within or after a film's credits. Disney now owns Marvel, and of course, it was Disney's recent announcement that prompted the writing of this paper. Disney Plus is the streaming service in focus right now—joining the more established Netflix and Amazon Prime and many, many others. Once a film is watched in Disney Plus and the end credits begin to roll, the screen is suddenly minimized to reveal a larger screen behind, suggesting what else one might wish to watch or simply going back to an "entry" screen used in choosing the just-watched film in the first place. In other words, unless one takes the pains to press the right buttons to enlarge it again, the end credits are rendered beyond being visually accessible. Walking out before or during the end credits in a theater does not limit—or does not much limit—the opportunity for those who choose to remain in their seats to view the names of

all the artists and all those otherwise associated with the film's production. Streaming services do limit this—not by removing the opportunity to witness all these names but making it “not the default” to do so. This idea may have the effect of limiting the exposure of those names, which may have the effect of restricting the development of the reputations of those whose names appear in the credits.

This notion may be a minor point, but it still seems a salient one. Many of us know the names of cinematographers, editors, and costume designers from the golden age of Classic Hollywood cinema because the credits ran before the film, and after repeated exposure to specific names, those names stuck in our memories. We are then primed to see those names again, and in recognizing them, we add to the bank of that artist's reputation that exists in our memory. Many people know the name “Ub Iwerks” as very common to early Disney films not only because the name itself is so unique but because it appeared so often at the top of Disney films and because it would have taken heroic efforts not to see those opening credits as we prepared ourselves for the start of the movie. From the late 1920s to the early 40s, Iwerks was almost as important to the production of Disney films as Walt himself, but during those years, we came to know this through watching film credits.

Production

Producers of films who otherwise could count on audiences being pulled into cinemas as potential viewers who recognized the names of directors and actors, who were intrigued by arresting film titles, and who were of necessity more adventurous in their willingness to watch films of which they were unsure, may feel the pull when producing content for home consumption to rely more on upon testing. Proven formulas to engage viewers (which is reinforced by the fact that all streaming services organize their content by category), to rely on capturing the attention of their audiences within seconds of the start of a film (a film like Paul Anderson's 2008 *There Will Be Blood*, where the first words of this film are not spoken until approximately fifteen minutes into the movie, likely would not have a chance), and to consider producing, instead of a stand-alone film, a “long-form series” where continued investment in the content is encouraged for the entire length of the series. While it may be argued that as resources required to create movies has increased dramatically since film's beginning, and so producers must be hyper-vigilant to produce films that will be financially successful, the evolution to streaming as the primary means of accessing film content may accelerate the acceptance that financial success is paramount, and that content must be produced in accord with that aim.

Access

The final area I wish to mention concerning the evolution of “going to the movies” from the cinema to the living room is access change. For this area, my worries are less settled in one direction or the other. For the cinematic experience, we must engage in all the preparation described above, travel to the cinema, and choose from the possibilities. For the home streaming scenario, access to filmic content is achieved in a very different way: one must purchase a subscription to a service, usually accompanied by a monthly bill, and this affords the viewer an assortment of choices that are usually enormous but at the same time ultimately circumscribed by what the service carries. In some sense, the associated commitment is both lesser and more significant than with the cinema: lesser in the sense that the monthly subscription price likely will be less than even a single cinema ticket, and lesser in the sense that one can leave a streamed film quickly and at any time—and more remarkable in the sense that while a visit to the cinema typically is a “one-off” event, a subscription entails at least a monthly commitment but more likely a commitment of years. Then, the commitment to individual films is substantively replaced

with a commitment to the range of provided content. Furthermore, it is unclear whether this is good or bad if our goal is to foster the best aesthetic experiences available.

Arnheim

My aesthetic worries about the evolution of film from the cinema to streaming are clearly of the same sort as Arnheim's worries about the evolution of film from silent black-and-white films that utilized montage as a style for connecting shots and sequencing scenes and cinematic techniques to direct and focus attention to "complete films" that replicated reality in full-blown ways. It would be wonderful if the lesson from recognizing this parallel were "do not worry; be happy; it will all be fine"—that the evolution of technique or delivery of artistic content changes, and not only do we adapt to the changes, but we find that new aesthetic doors open to us. Indeed, with a more extensive technical buffet, filmmakers can do more—have more control, present new spectacles, engage emotion more profoundly—with the new options.

However, my read on the parallel between my worries and Arnheim's is less sanguine. Since the 1940s, films have indeed become increasingly realistic. Many of the conventions of cinematic acting from the 30s and 40s, for instance, would seem alien today. Moreover, by the end of the 1920s, films had already become increasingly and heavily focused on narrative content. Story or plot (different but closely related) was vital, and while cinematography, editing, *mise en scene*, and sound were all essential components in the overall construction of a film's form, narrative held center court. In short, I believe Arnheim's worries were borne out. I believe Arnheim was right in his dour predictions about film's future, and the best evidence for this is that people shunt off "experimental film" to an existence relegated to classrooms and tiny art houses—and we call it "experimental film" to signify that it is not mainstream. However, "experimental film" is precisely that style/genre/kind of film that most closely accords with the world of modern art. As modern art developed and developed its enhanced focus on cognitive engagement as key to the art experience—and as interpretation (interpretive activity) developed as a response—the mainstream film went in a different direction. Only some films today qualify as works of art. Moreover, this is the legacy of the future that Arnheim predicted in 1933.

If there is a lesson for those of us watching the evolution of film from the cinema to streaming, a lesson we can take from Arnheim, it is just this: there is no stopping progress. Arnheim was convinced that the new technological innovations would be embraced, and the ensuing new style of filmmaking would supplant the old style. His final pronouncements on the matter were not a call to revolution or filmic conservatism; they instead read like Stoic advice to adapt to a changing landscape and look for what new aesthetic advancements might be forthcoming as a result. Thus, one can—sanguinely or phlegmatically—do the same. As the Walt Disney Company, on December 10, 2020, effectively altered the film world in ways both very substantive and likely irreversible, it is now our challenge to make the "aesthetic most" of the brave new future.

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Notes

¹ Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (University of California Press, 2006).

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934).