Neoformalism: An Approach to Teaching Film Studies in New Zealand Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Noting the lack of subject material available in New Zealand for the teaching of film studies in secondary school, this thesis attempts to describe a framework which is designed to introduce particular concepts and provide a base for different ways of thinking about film. It endeavours to bridge the gap between those texts that do not have enough theory and those that have too much, lacking easy application to the secondary school classroom.

The objective of this study is to reduce the generalisation that cinema is of little cultural value, and to bring the genuine love that individual's have for film, into an educational context. This has been done through the use and adaptation of Kristin Thompson's Neoformalist approach.

The first part of this study discusses the differences between an approach and a method, and the benefits of the neoformalist approach. This includes an investigation of available literature and how applicable it is to the practical teaching of film studies. The second part deals with the academic principles of the Neoformalist approach, the tools of analysis, and foregrounds the fact that film is a constructed medium in which spectators have an active role. The third part involves the breaking down of the academic terms of the Neoformalist approach and the demonstration of how they can be applied in an educational context. It does this by foregrounding film studies within the paradigm of the Classical Narrative, or mainstream, popular film. The final section offers two brief analyses of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and *Once Were Warriors*, because the only way for a student to gain ability to analyse films is through practice in viewing films critically and reading analyses by other critics.

Essentially it is argued that, Neoformalism is merely one approach to teaching film studies and does not preclude any other reasonable approach. It is based on the assumption that one must understand what one is studying (the film) *before* one can go to the next stage and search out wider notions such as ideology, meaning and so on. Therefore it is beneficial for students that a formal analysis precede any cultural or other

form of analysis, under the assumption that certain skills need to be developed before the ideological and cultural are able to be effectively isolated from the formal. Neoformalism does not preclude such concerns, but grounds them in some contextual, concrete base.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Film is unlimited not only in its choice of subject matter but also in the scope of its approach to that material. A film's mood and treatment can range anywhere between the lyric and the epic; in point of view, it can cover the full spectrum from the purely objective to the intensely subjective; in depth, it can focus on the surface realities and the purely sensual, or delve into the intellectual and philosophical. A film can look to the remote past, or probe the distant future; it can make a few seconds seem like hours, or compress a century into minutes. Finally, film can run the gamut of feeling from the most fragile, tender and beautiful to the most brutal, violent, and repulsive.[1]

1.1 WHY TEACH FILM ANALYSIS?

Until recently most, if not all, forms of media have been deemed unworthy of academic study because of their image as "mere entertainment" and their low art rating. Traditionally if a media form, such as film was to be studied, it would be done so under the embracing arm of the English Syllabus, where it would only be studied as an adaptation from a novel, with the film itself receiving no credit.

Now with the introduction of Media Studies at University and Secondary school levels, this notion of media forms, such as film and television, being unworthy of study is slowly changing, although not so much in the area of secondary schools. Many parents, eager for their children to have a good career, still ask the question of whether the academic study of media has any point.

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1 Boggs, Joseph, M. *The Art of Watching Films*. (2nd Edition.) California, Mayfield Publishing Company. 1985. Pg..3.

One answer to that question, is that since the explosion of media within the world, and because it surrounds us in every facet of our lives, we need to train people to be able to deal with this ever increasing influx of media. James Monaco[2] makes the point that the film and electronic media have, over the years, drastically changed the way we perceive the world - and thus ourselves. Yet we all naturally accept the vast amounts of information they convey to us in massive doses without questioning how they tell us what they tell us.

Film can also be studied purely for art's sake - students study art history at school, so why not film? Although this may get us into the great debate about 'high' and 'low' art, it must be noted that contrary to the beliefs of some critics, films do have a simple entertaining effect. Thompson[3] suggests that as with physical exercise, the experience of artworks, can, over a period of time, have considerable impact on our lives in general. And because playfully entertaining films can engage our perceptions and emotions as complexly as can films dealing with serious, difficult themes, the debate over high and low art is not really an issue. (Good examples here are films such as *Forrest Gump* and *The Birdcage*, where serious issues are what make the comical situations, and the actual issue may then become upstaged by the comedy.)

One may then ask, if media are so prevalent in our society, wouldn't dealing with media forms such as film, just become common sense?

John Izod[4] in his book *Reading the Screen: an introduction to film studies,* answers this question with regards to studying film and television. He states that the experience of watching the screen seems to be enjoyed so naturally and readily that we do not think of it as something that has had to be learnt. He goes on to say that no viewer, before watching a film or a television programme, has to go through the long and weary process each of us has had to suffer in, say, learning to read a book. Izod further suggests that where reading a book, at first seems like hard work, watching a film is totally relaxing and seems to come naturally. Izod[5] uses the example of a child growing up. To a baby, images on the screen mean nothing, but as the child grows up and starts to recognise images and ask

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2 Monaco, James. *How To Read A Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media.* (4th Edition) New York, Oxford University Press. 1981. p.vii.

3 Ibid., p.8.

4 Izod, John. *Reading The Screen: An introduction to film studies.* Essex, Longman York Press. 1984. p.5.

questions about what they are seeing, the reading of the cinematic image becomes naturalised through practice. In other words, the more films a child, or person, watches, the better they get at 'reading', and thus understanding, the cues in a film.

So, if this is the case, what seems to be the point of learning something one already knows, and which appears to be learnt naturally by practising and informal learning? After all, if everyone reads the screen almost without knowing it, why take the matter any further?

Whether we like it or not, film (and television) influence all areas of our lives, and success in public life often relies on learning how to communicate with the media. The way we think about many groups of people, such as the police or people from the medical profession, is also influenced by what we see on the screen - "whether it is in terms of soap opera stereotypes or the startling and un-stereotyped accounts provided by good documentary films".[6]

Another reason to study film, is as Izod[7] states, because meaning in film is **constructed**, and it can be constructed in many different ways, all of which subtly alter the meaning that is conveyed. Izod goes on to say:

> *To learn something of the methods by which a film has been put together is to discover some of the means by which those who made it tried to shape the audience's understanding of it. It is to discover that our responses to what goes on have been organised not only by the events we watch, but to some extent also by the way those events are presented by the screen.*[8]

Film analysis is not meant to dissect a film so much that we kill the joy of watching it. As Boggs puts it: *"analysis means breaking up the whole to discover the nature, proportion, function and inter-relationships of the parts".*[9] Boggs further states that analysis neither claims nor attempts to explain everything about an art form. Film will always retain its special magic and its mystical qualities. The elusive, flowing stream of images will

5 Ibid.
6 Horrocks, R. and Tremewan, P. *On Film II.* Auckland, Heinemann Publishers. 1980. Pg.4.
7 Izod, p.6.
8 Ibid.

always escape complete analysis and complete understanding. In fact, no final answers exist about any work of art. A film, like anything else of true aesthetic value, can never be completely captured by analysis.[10]

Analysis also has the further advantage of helping us to lock the experience in our minds so that we may savour it longer in our memory. By looking at a film analytically we engage ourselves with it both intellectually and creatively, and thus make it more truly our own.

The ultimate purpose of analysis, and its greatest benefit, is that it opens up new avenues of awareness and new depths of understanding, (and the understanding it brings will deepen our appreciation.) Instead of cancelling out the emotional experience of watching the film, analysis can enhance and enrich that experience, for as we become more perceptive and look more deeply into the film, new levels of emotional experience will emerge.[11]

1.2 WHAT NEEDS TO BE STUDIED?

> *In general, when we go to a film, we know relatively little about the story; by the end we know a lot more, usually the whole story. What happens in between?*[12]

French film critic Christian Metz once said "Film is so difficult to explain because it is so easy to understand" (cited in Image Wise - competence in visual literacy).[13] What Metz meant by that was that film is only *seemingly* easy to understand. He goes on to say that viewers see certain functions and are so taken in by then and their eyes are so fooled by the apparent obviousness of the action at that they never stop to ask 'Why do we believe that this or that is happening?'

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9 Boggs, p.6.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p.9.
12 Bordwell and Thompson, p.75.
13 Van Zyl, John. *Image Wise - competence in visual literacy.* South Africa, Hodder and Stoughton Educational. 1987. Pg. 15.

As suggested above by Metz, many people find film easy to understand, or at least like to think they do. However, there is often more to film than merely meets the eye. Many viewers, for example, take for granted that what they see on the screen is what has actually happened, and that it has happened in the exact sequence with which it was shown. John van Zyl[14] suggests that viewers see certain functions and are so taken in by them and their eyes are so fooled by the apparent obviousness of the action, that they never stop to ask, 'why do we believe that this or that is happening?'. Van Zyl uses the example:

> *If one sees a child pick up a stone and throw it at something outside the frame of the picture, and one is shown a window breaking in the next shot, one simply concludes that the stone one saw being thrown broke that specific window.*[15]

However, in reality, this may not be the case, as the two shots could have been months apart and kilometres apart, but because they were put together, they apparently made sense.

Another example of this concealed logic, used by van Zyl[16] is one that often occurs in Walt Disney Wildlife films. The viewer sees a prairie rat peering anxiously into the sky, and then in the next shot, sees a hawk circling menacingly. When the rat jumps back into his hole, in the third shot, the viewer generally assumes that it was threatened by the self-same hawk. the truth of the matter, as van Zyl points out, is that the rat was probably filmed in Texas, the hawk in Arkansas six months earlier, but when the shots were juxtaposed, not only does the viewer create a logical connection between the rat and the hawk, they also attribute nervousness and menace to two neutral shots, without being aware of it.

When watching films, many people have learned to enjoy without understanding how and why one enjoys. Van Zyl suggests that when a viewer sits on the edge of their seat in fear during a chase sequence, or when someone catches their breath at some fantastic events in a science fiction film, the viewer seldom asks, or notices, why one's reactions are like that.

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.

Van Zyl goes on to say that in the chase sequence, the editing was probably done in a certain way, with the shots getting shorter and shorter so that tension was increased, and in the science fiction film the special effects were probably generated by computer. Knowing this enables the viewer to talk about films more sensibly and more knowledgeably.

So when discussing why and how we need to study film, one notion needs to be kept in mind - **Deconstruction.** This is the whole premise to teaching film studies, as by deconstructing film the student is able to cut through the obviousness, the things they take for granted, and to see that what they thought was real was merely mediated and constructed. Van Zyl[17] states that the people who make films do their very best to persuade the viewer that what is happening is real. They try to conceal all the ways that the viewer can detect the unreality of film. They conceal the cuts, they make the camera movement unobtrusive, they make the acting realistic (see subchapter on Classical cinema, and invisible editing).

1.3 HOW SHOULD FILM BE STUDIED/TAUGHT?

Film needs theory, like it needs a scratch on the negative. Alan Parker [18]

According to Lapsley and Westlake[19], this supposition is not an uncommon one: directors calling on inspiration and imagination, don't need it, and neither do audiences, who have only to watch and respond. Bring in theory, the assumption goes, and you can say goodbye to the magic of the movies.

This, of course, is not what theory, or in the case of this thesis, a good approach, should do. Taking out the enjoyment of watching a film is not, and should not, be the aim of the analyst. Enjoyment is something that should be enhanced by a deeper analysis of any film.

16 Ibid. p. 16.
17 Ibid. p.21.
18 Cited in Lapsley, R. and Westlake, M. *Film Theory: an introduction.* New York, Manchester University Press. 1988. Pg. vi.
19 Ibid.

Film also has both educational and entertainment value which is something that students and teachers alike, should be aware of, and need to learn how to distinguish between. The ultimate aim of film analysis should be to critically examine the total value of a given film, and not just its separate components, such as who made it and what generic features it may have.

The underlying assumption of this thesis then, is that there is an art to watching films that most people are not aware of, and that special skills and techniques can sharpen and enhance the film experience.

As suggested by Richard Lacey,[20] a film educator should help children 'learn how to learn' these special skills. It should not be the purpose of the teacher to didactically prescribe ways of thinking about films, because ultimately, they will only be teaching their own opinion, as film is such a unique experience for each and every individual.

Lacey[21] also suggests that audiences see movies in vastly different ways, and no package of discrete concepts or interpretations can encompass all those ways of experiencing. Therefore we cannot, and should not, reduce a film experience to a few neat lessons. The student's emotional investments in an intense film experience - like any form of art - make it especially difficult for anyone to get by with conventional approaches, such as thematic, ideological or auteur based approaches.

For example, we should steer away from the teaching of films using techniques that succeed in other subjects (such as English), because movies are special types of experiences with their own forms, language, and kinds of meaning. "When movies are taught deductively or as if they were literature, the sense of interaction - of art - is lost in translation".[22]

Therefore, students need to be taught how to study their perception of a film, rather than to try and evaluate it. As the teacher, evaluation can be avoided by not setting rigid

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20 Richard A. Lacey. *Seeing With Feeling: Film In The Classroom.* Philadelphia, W.B. Saunders Company. 1972. p.2.
21 Ibid., p.3.
22 Ibid., p.11.

guidelines about what, when, why and how to teach specific films. Instead, "we should explore the individual aesthetic of each film in order to remain flexible and inductive".[23]

Geoff Mayer makes the pertinent point:

> *Students can only respond actively to a film, according to their skill in reading the cues contained within the film. This is dependent upon the degree in which their viewing skills have been developed, combined of course, with levels of maturity and other individual factors.* [24]

Mayer goes on to say that students need to be aware of the underlying strategies employed by different types of film. The task for the teacher then, is not to 'explain' a film, nor to assume the role of arbiter of taste, but, as Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky argues, to call attention to it, to provide a flexible approach that is suited to each film whilst simultaneously addressing the wider formal and cultural context.

This thesis, however, is not designed to transform ordinary filmgoers into expert movie critics. It is more to broadly suggest what to look for and how to look for it, thus helping students (and teachers) to become more aware of the complexity of film art.

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23 Ibid., p.15.

24 Mayer, Geoff. Teaching Film Studies Through Shadows On The Wall. in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies.* Vol.No.2, 1994, p.62.

Chapter Two: Background and Review of Relevant Literature

> *The aim of the formalist method, or at least one of its aims, is not to explain the work, but to call attention to it, to restore that 'orientation towards form' which is characteristic of a work or art.*[1]

2.1 Introduction

In the past, when attempting to teach students how to analyse a film, one could assume that it has been the norm to try and explain or interpret the film in terms of its meaning and/or its social and ideological impact. Instead, this thesis will shift the emphasis from interpretation to comprehension.

Rather than trying to interpret what the film maker(s) were trying to impart, which of course is impossible unless one is told directly by the film makers themselves, this thesis will focus on the aesthetic context as a prerequisite to any analysis inviting interpretation of social values.

Because each artwork is, of course, a very individual experience that should never be seen as universally accepted, interpretation of art should merely be seen as one small aspect of analysis.

2.2 An Approach

> *There is no such thing as film analysis without an approach. Critics do not go to films only to gather facts which they convey in pristine fashion to*

> *others. What we take to be the 'facts' about a film will partly depend on what we assume films to consist of, how we assume people watch films, how we believe films relate to the world as a whole, and what we take the purposes of analysis to be.*[2]

Neoformalism, coined by Thompson, is an approach adapted from Formalist Russian literary critics of the 1920's,[3] and based upon many assumptions about the general nature of art. These assumptions refer to points such as traits shared by different artworks, about procedures spectators go through in understanding all artworks, and about ways in which artworks relate to society.[4]

The above quote by Kristin Thompson is the opening statement to her book on the analytical approach of neoformalism, *Breaking The Glass Armour*, and discusses the central premise and goal of film analysis. Thompson suggests that assumptions we have about film need to be examined, so we have at least a chance of creating a reasonably systematic approach to analysis, because if these assumptions are not thought over, then the approach may be random and self contradictory.

Neoformalism is an aesthetic approach, a term used by Thompson[5] to refer to a set of assumptions about traits shared by different artworks, about procedures spectators go through in understanding all artworks, and about ways in which artworks relate to society. However, by stressing film as art, it is necessary to ignore certain other aspects of the medium, such as the history of cinema and so on.

The approach helps the analyst to be consistent in studying more than one artwork, which is something that is very important when approaching the teaching of secondary school students. When undertaking analysis, there will always be more than one artwork to consider, so an approach that allows consistency in analysis is always going to be of great benefit, because it allows the student to concentrate on the film itself rather than

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1 See Victor Shklovski. "Pushkin and Sterne: Eugene Onegin", trans. James M. Holquist, in *20th Century Russian Literary Criticism*, edited by Victor Erlich. New Haven, Yale University Press. 1975. P. 68.

2 Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armour: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. 1988.

3 Ibid., p.3.

4 Ibid.

on comprehending new approaches each time. That is, it will provide a flexible approach that will permit a range of methods.

Crucial to this approach is an emphasis on the whole film.[6] Instead of looking at certain aspects of a film such as other approaches do, for example auteurism looks only at the aspects that deal with authorial style, and the ideological or thematic approach concentrates mainly on the social issues of a film, neoformalism suggests that viewers experience the whole film at once, so any analytical approach should discuss the whole film as well. By doing this, the student is able to grasp better the way the different aspects of a film work together to form the whole.

This is not to say that this approach is the only valid one. A great many other approaches to film study, such as Generic, Ideological, and Thematic approaches and so on, are used successfully and beneficially. But the analytical approach of neoformalism has one distinct advantage: It is teachable, and allows other aspects, such as the above mentioned, to be introduced. Because neoformalism is so flexible and variable, taking into account aspects such as viewer's personal backgrounds and how a film exists in history, or how expected generic traditions effect viewer response (see Chapter two for more detail), it can, in effect, be used as an 'umbrella' approach, in which all other approaches can be discussed, or at least referred to.

At its most basic, neoformalism is merely an approach to teaching film studies and does not preclude any other reasonable approach. It is based on the assumption that the analyst must understand what they are studying (the film) before they can go to the next stage and search out ideological, psychological, sociological, generic, auteurist notions. It is beneficial for students that a formal analysis precede any cultural or other form of analysis, because certain skills need to be developed before the ideological and cultural are able to be effectively isolated from the formal. Neoformalism does not preclude such concerns, but grounds them in some contextual, concrete base.

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5 Ibid.

6 Bordwell, D., Thompson, K. *Film Art: an introduction.* (2nd Edition) New York, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1986. p.vii.

This is even more important with secondary school students, as they have no context or language to articulate their reaction to film. Thus, the analytical approach of neoformalism can also be structured to suit the classroom situation, whereas other approaches that are more emotional and intuitive are so highly subjective and vary so greatly from one individual to another they are difficult to share in the classroom. Neoformalism provides a complete, systematised, and reasonable framework for the study of film.

So this thesis is designed, not to be a typical textbook, but as a flexible framework, and basis for study, that can be applied to a wide variety of films. This is an area that many textbooks fail in - the application of an approach that can be applied to any film, and not just the few that are dealt with in each textbook. This study can thus be used as a contemporary framework from which film can be studied, and which can be used in conjunction with the many (useful) textbooks that lack a functional framework.

2.3 APPROACH VERSUS METHOD

Before discussing the principles and application of the neoformalist approach, one needs to discuss what the definition of an approach is, and what the difference is - if there is one - between an approach and a method.

As mentioned above, Thompson defines an approach as a set of assumptions about different characteristics shared by artworks, about the strategies spectators go through in understanding all artworks, and about ways in which artworks relate to society.[7] A method, on the other hand, is considered by Thompson, as something more specific: 'a set of procedures employed in the actual analytical process.'[8]

Because the neoformalist approach allows for consistency in studying more than one artwork, and is very flexible and adaptable, it is of great importance to teaching film in secondary schools, as it allows the films to be studied for themselves, and not in terms of conforming to one method. If all films did conform to one method, then, Thompson[9]

7 Thompson, p.3.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p.4.

suggests, these preconceived methods, applied simply for demonstrative purposes, often end by reducing the complexity of films. There is also the danger that the analyst may only select films that seem suited to displaying a chosen method, which then limits the field of analysis, and thus the student's genuine understanding of cinema, per se.

Thompson further suggests:

> *Because the method exists before the choice of film and the process of analysis, its assumptions must be broad enough to accommodate any film. Every film must then be considered in some way 'the same' in order to make it conform to the method.*[10]

The danger here is that the method's broad assumptions will tend to iron out differences in films which in the end, makes films seem dull and unintriguing. For example, if one was to use the generic approach for every film studied, one would run into trouble when facing a film that did not directly conform to any particular genre. One would then have to reduce the film itself to insignificance so as to squeeze out any generic quality possible, which then merely reduces the film to a label of 'Western' or 'Science Fiction' and so on, ignoring the beauty of other aspects of the film.

Most traditional approaches have an attendant method that can be applied to a particular film, but it is often the case that the final analysis of that film ultimately serves to confirm the method, rather than tell us anything new, and the approach thus becomes perpetually self-confirming. This is not to say that certain methods do not apply to certain films, it is merely saying that one method can not apply to every film, whereas an approach can.

Therefore the basic premise to Thompson's argument is that an approach cannot and should not fully dictate how we would analyse any given film because artistic conventions are constantly changing, and with the infinite possible variations within existing conventions, we could hardly expect that one approach could anticipate every possibility. Thus we should use the approach in conjunction with the film.

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10 Ibid.

Neoformalism then, is an approach that builds into itself the need to be constantly challenged and thus changed. Thompson[11] suggests that each analysis should tell us something not only about the film in question, but about the possibilities of film as an art, an important part of studying film. She goes on to say:

> *Neoformalism as an approach does offer a series of broad assumptions about how artworks are constructed and how they operate in cueing audience response. But neoformalism does not prescribe how these assumptions are embodied in individual films. Rather, the basic assumptions can be used to construct a method specific to the problems raised by each film.*[12]

In summary, the approach is what allows us to judge which of the many questions we could ask about a work and the method then becomes an instrument we devise to answer questions about the text. Thus an approach, in the case of this thesis the neoformalist approach, is, in effect, essential and useful in teaching film studies as it develops a framework which the students can apply to any film, not just a certain few.

2.4 COMPARATIVE STUDIES/LITERATURE REVIEW

> *Teachers need to be familiar with the underlying concepts and norms in order to provide a systematic approach to Film Studies that extends beyond just character, theme and values.*[13]

Richard Lacey in his book Seeing With Feeling - Film in the classroom[14] makes the point that a film educator should help the student 'learn how to learn', and should steer away from didactically prescribing ways of thinking about films. Because audiences see movies in vastly different ways, Lacey continues, no package of discrete concepts or interpretations can encompass all those ways of experiencing, therefore we cannot, and should not, reduce a film experience to a few neat lessons. The student's emotional

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11 Ibid., p.6.
12 Ibid.
13 Mayer, Geoff. Approaching Film Studies: Muriel's Wedding and other films. in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 1. 1995.
14 Richard Lacey. *Seeing With Feeling: Film in the Classroom*. Philadelphia, W.B. Saunders Company. 1972. p.2.

investments in an intense film experience - like any form of art - make it especially difficult for anyone to get by with conventional approaches, such as thematic, ideological or auteur based approaches.

Many of the books currently used for teaching film analysis in New Zealand secondary schools, although excellent resource books containing much useful information, tend to lack a solid basis or theory from which to work. They lack a conceptual framework, and thus it becomes hard to apply the information in the book to films other than the ones used as examples within the text. Many are also using approaches that are successful in teaching other subjects such as English literature, but that have not been refined for teaching film studies.

On the other hand, the texts used that have a solid theoretical framework, tend to lack ideas and understanding for educational application, and are often too theoretical for the teachers wanting to use them. The theories used are often so subjective that they can only be applied to a small group of films, and are difficult to apply to films outside of the examples used in the book. These texts are also mainly American or Australian, with none being really focused toward New Zealand or New Zealand made films.

The texts tend to go from one extreme to the other, without finding any middle ground - the ground that the teachers (and students) are really needing. That is, a text that is practical, readily applicable and easy to use. With the introduction of the new Arts curriculum - within which Media Studies and Communication play a big part - there is a very real need for new texts that can provide teachers, untrained in the field of media, with a user-friendly and applicable text from which they are immediately able to teach.

Thus, the aim of this thesis is to provide both academic theory, which will then be broken down into easily applicable educational terms, as well as a solid conceptual framework on which to base analysis. This thesis is not meant to be an all-inclusive grand text, but it is designed to provide teachers, and students, with a place to start, and provide a base from which other texts can be written, or used in conjunction with the approach outlined here.

2.4.1 Theories and 'Anti-theories'

For simplicity's sake this thesis has grouped approaches together into the collective approaches of theories and anti-theories. "Theories" are the texts that are theoretically based and deal with one or more contemporary approaches, for example writers who focus on a Generic approach. "Anti-theories", on the other hand, are texts where the writers have no overt theoretical position, or at least one that is not recognised or foregrounded.

2.4.1.1 Theories

There are many different approaches to the study of film, such as Generic, Auteurist, Psychoanalytic, Structuralist, Ideological, Sociological and the list goes on. All of these approaches to film analysis are viable and valuable approaches, especially when used all together, however, when used by themselves they have some major limitations. For example, as Robin Wood[15] suggests, Auteur Theory in its heyday (1960's and 1970's), concentrated attention exclusively on the fingerprints, thematic or stylistic, of the individual artist; recent attempts to discuss the complete 'filmic text' have tended to throw out ideas of personal authorship altogether.

Each theory, or approach, has given its underlying position, its own validity - the validity being dependent upon and restricted by the position. Each can offer insights into different areas of cinema and different aspects of a single film, but many cannot be used together in an all encompassing approach.

Genre and Auteur Theory

The Generic approach has the advantage of expanding the boundaries of film criticism so that conventional mainstream films, which in many cases would simply be ignored, become a fertile landscape to be explored and illuminated both as examples of film art and as reflections of the social matrix. However, the drawback of this approach must also be acknowledged. Maltby and Craven[16] make the point that simple counting of icons, endless cataloguing of differences, the defining and redefining of categories and

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15 Robin Wood, *Film Genre Reader*. Edited by Barry Keith Grant. Austin - University of Texas Press, 1988. P.59.

subcategories of genres can become tedious exercises in scholarship, which don't really prove insight, or say anything of significance about individual films. On the other hand, the generic approach to film studies, combined with other approaches such as neoformalism, is an excellent way of demonstrating stylistic and ideological change, especially in an historical setting.[17]

Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack in their book Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film[18] suggest that the Auteurist analysis is another very useful approach when used in conjunction with others. However, when used by itself, it also develops some serious limitations. Bywater and Sobchack further suggest that the extreme application of auteur theory causes problems such as the overvaluing of the director. This may distort a beginning film student's judgement of an individual film because of its connection with a director's total work. It may also cause students to become preoccupied with finding and identifying the creative motifs in a director's work for creativity, without reference to the social and economic forces operating in film production and distribution.

For both the auteurist and generic approaches, the individual film has little critical importance by itself. It must be compared and contrasted with similar films; with other works by the same auteur or with other works in the genre. These approaches revolve about the interplay between the experience of individual films (the text) and the cumulative experience of many films either in a genre or by a specific filmmaker (the context in which the films were made). Such approaches demand a wide and diverse spectrum of film viewing, as well as immersion in the literature of films and film makers, which of course, may be a little too much to ask from senior secondary school students.

Neoformalist Theory

A text used in many secondary schools and introductory university courses is Film Art: an introduction by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. This text seeks to introduce

16 Richard Maltby and Ian Craven. *Hollywood Cinema.* Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1995, p.107.
17 See Maltby and Craven, pp.107-109. for more in depth discussion on the limitations of the generic approach.

the reader to the aesthetics of film, assuming that the reader has no knowledge of cinema beyond the experience of moviegoing.

Thompson and Bordwell clearly state in the preface that by stressing film as art they necessarily ignore other aspects of the medium, such as instructional filmmaking, propaganda, the social history of cinema, and the impact it has as a mass medium. They do however, acknowledge that these are still important dimensions of cinema, but each would require a separate book for adequate treatment.[19] (This is something that many other film studies texts fail to acknowledge)

Bordwell and Thompson suggest that although it may be possible to randomly survey all the possible approaches to film aesthetics, this in itself would be far too complex. Instead they sought an approach that would lead the reader in logical steps through various aspects of film aesthetics. Crucial to this approach is the whole film.[20]

This approach which the authors use is referred to as the Neoformalist approach - coined by Kristin Thompson - which takes into account the wholeness and unity of a film as existing in history, along with its aesthetic value.

This book provides an excellent framework and basis from which to teach about, and learn about, film. However, the criticisms of this approach lies in the sense that for teachers and students with no previous knowledge of studying film, the book does not always readily adapt to direct use in New Zealand secondary schools.

Film Art deals mainly with difficult art films, or films that tend to deviate significantly from mainstream, popular cinema (see section on Classical cinema), which this thesis believes to be too advanced for an introductory secondary school film studies course. When dealing with secondary school students one would assume that it would be easier to start with popular films which the students both know and enjoy.

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18 Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack. *Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to narrative film.* New York, Longman Inc. 1989. pp.50-54.
19 Bordwell & Thompson, 1993, p.xiii.
20 See Ibid.

2.4.1.2 Anti-theoretical approaches

Anti-theoretical texts, as used in this thesis are texts that appear to be devoid of theory. If one was to undertake a survey of texts that are being used in New Zealand secondary schools, one would find that aside from the contemporary texts and approaches that have been used successfully in the English curriculum and so on, many of the existing texts fail to incorporate any recognisable theoretical position.

This is not to say that the material contained within these texts is not useful in itself, but it is to say that without some kind of framework which the students are able to work from, much of the material becomes useless when practically applying it to films, especially films that are not covered in the text.

A text such as Shadows on the Wall: A study of seven New Zealand Feature films[21] is such an example. Shadows on the Wall is an valuable resource book geared specifically toward New Zealand feature films. However, it has a literal approach ostensibly centred on production processes and close readings, which are of interest and relevance, but have little use for a formal analysis of a film, and are hard to apply to films outside those that are used in the text.

Geoff Mayer, in an article about teaching film studies using Shadows on the Wall[22] suggests that while the authors have attempted to address questions of narrative structure and style at the beginning of the book, and in each chapter, the concepts are generalised and tentatively developed, seemingly to indicate that the authors are unsure as to how far questions of form and structure can be taken with secondary students. Mayer goes on to say, that developments in approaches to teaching film have demonstrated in actual classroom situations that the fear that 'film theory' is too arcane or too difficult for secondary students is no longer tenable, and this is something that now needs to be foregrounded.[23]

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21 Cairns, B. and Martin, H. *Shadows on the Wall: A Study of Seven New Zealand Feature Films*. Auckland, Longman Paull. 1994.

22 See Geoff Mayer. Teaching Film Studies Through Shadows On The Wall. in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*. Vol. 1., No. 2. 1994.

23 Mayer suggests to see for example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1986. Also, Geoff Mayer, Film as Text, Brisbane, Jacaranda Press, 1991.

Another area of concern with a non-theoretical text such as Shadows on the Wall is that claims such as teaching students to be able to understand the role of film within our own culture[24] are also unfounded. Without a framework for looking at how any film pertains to a certain culture or how a film fits into the social structure, one would assume that it would be rather hard to understand the significance of the New Zealand film culture without having anything else to compare it to. Texts such as Shadows on the Wall also cannot provide an approach for students to study new and different films.

There is also the danger, with texts that have no overt theoretical position; that they will attempt to cover too much material at once. By doing this there is the problem of a lack of justice being done to each topic, which can in turn cause the student to develop a rather nonchalant attitude toward film analysis.

On Film II by Roger Horrocks and Philip Tremewan is a text where this is evident. While the text is an excellent resource book, it could also be seen as not much more than a rather large glossary of terms. The authors do state in the introduction that they have tried to make the book sufficiently flexible so that it can be used either for a film course (when the class is studying film as a subject in its own right) or as part of another subject-area. They also make the comment that in terms of their general approach, they have tried to keep a balance between practical and technical aspects, and artistic and theoretical aspects. They go on to say that many books tend to be very one-sided and that it is important to give equal weight to both sides. This is a valuable comment, however, with film being such a complex and variable medium, there needs to be a rather heavy amount of weight distributed to both sides, and not just the token gestures of a page per topic that Horrocks and Tremewan have devoted to each aspect, in On Film II.

Another hazard one can see in texts which do not have an overt theoretical position, is that they are often designed to be used in the English curriculum, studying film in the same way that novels, plays and poetry are studied, which of course is not suitable, purely because of the difference in the nature of the different mediums. Flicks:

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24 See Cairns and Martin, p.viii.

Studying Film As Text[25] is a text used in Australian schools that although it believes in discussing films as individual texts, is ultimately designed for use in the English curriculum. Movies are special types of experiences with their own forms, language, and kinds of meaning thus, Lacey makes the point that when movies are taught deductively or as if they were literature, the sense of interaction - of art - is lost in translation.[26]

Flicks also tends to concentrate on more thematic and ideological issues, ignoring the importance of studying film for aesthetic reasons, which one can assume is because it is designed to be used in an English curriculum.

One notices, upon a survey of existing texts in New Zealand, that the content also tends to concentrate on cultural or ideological issues, which of course, do not give any credit to the film itself. It is beneficial to look at these areas, but as noted earlier, before a film can be studied for its cultural and ideological issues, a formal analysis needs to be developed, so these issues are able to be isolated from the formal. Geoff Mayer[27] sums this up in saying that without an understanding of basic film modes, students have difficulty in developing strategies to understand the cultural and aesthetic significance of films.

Essentially, most of the non-theoretical books are valuable resources for specific films such as the seven New Zealand feature films discussed in Shadows on the Wall. However, as principal introductory texts for teachers of senior secondary school, they need to be preceded with a more general introductory text that offers some form of contemporary framework, if teachers and students are to get the full benefit of them.

2.5 Aim

This thesis thus endeavours to bridge the gap between those texts that do not have enough theory and those that have too much. The aim is to create a text that can be used

25 Partridge, D. & Hughes, P. *Flicks: Studying Film As Text*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press. 1992.
26 See Lacey, p.11.
27 Mayer, p.61.

in conjunction with texts lacking a contemporary framework, or with texts that are lacking easy application to the secondary school classroom.

The objective is also to reduce the generalisation that cinema is of little cultural value, and to bring the genuine love that people have for film, into an educational context. This will be done by using and adapting Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's Neoformalist approach.

Thus, this thesis will look at how a film functions, so the notion of defamiliarization can be attended to. The aim is to stop students taking film for granted, and to help them understand how a film cues them to feel how they feel. This is because there is an inherent danger for all film to become a kind of propaganda in the sense that more often than not, films reinforce a particular ideology and way of looking at life. However, if students are aware of the finer workings of film, then they are more adept at making an informed decision about the material they have seen.

Chapter Three: Neoformalist Approach

A film is a world which organises itself in terms of a story, in order to differentiate it from the novel, which is a story organising itself in a world.[1]

A film is not simply a random batch of elements. Like all artworks a film has ***Form****. By film form, in its broadest sense, we mean the total system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film.*[2]

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We all have a notion of the typical Hollywood film which carries with it a set of expectations about cinematic form and style, seeming to be blatantly obvious to the ordinary viewer.

However, as suggested above, a film is not merely a random collection of elements. If it were, there would be a very good chance that nobody would understand this random jumble of events. But as Thompson and Bordwell point out, a film has **form.** In other words, the elements and parts of a film are all related together, guided by organising laws and rules, into its own system - a system which is created to affect and stimulate our individual experiences.

Bordwell and Thompson[3] suggest that one way in which a film's form can affect our experience is by the way it creates a special sort of involvement on the part of the

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1 Jean Mitry, cited in *Concepts in Film Theory.* by Andrew Dudley. London, Oxford University Press Inc. 1984. p.76.

2 Bordwell, D., Thompson, K. *Film Art: an introduction.* (4th Edition) New York, McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993, p.42.

3 See Bordwell and Thompson, p.44.

spectator. In everyday life, we perceive things around us in a practical way. But in a film, the things that happen on the screen serve no such practical end for us. We can see them differently. For example, in life, if a person fell down on the street, we would probably hurry to help the person up. But in a film, when an actor such as Steve Martin, or Charlie Chaplin falls, we laugh.

Bordwell and Thompson go on to say:

> *We watch a pattern which is no longer just 'out there' in the everyday world, but which has become a calculated part within a self-contained whole. Film Form can even make us perceive things anew, shaking us out of our accustomed habits and suggesting fresh ways of hearing, seeing, feeling and thinking.*[4]

As suggested in Chapter One, the process of being able to perceive films and to see them anew is formulated in the Neoformalist approach. This is done, as Shklovsky[5] suggests, by calling attention to the work rather than by trying to explain it, a process which he terms *defamiliarization.*

The basic principle in neoformalism and a concept at the heart of the teaching of film analysis is defamiliarization.

3.2 DEFAMILIARIZATION

> *To learn something of the methods by which a film has been put together is to discover some of the means by which those who made it tried to shape the audience's understanding of it. It is to discover that our responses to what goes on have been organised not only by the events we watch, by to some extent also by the way those events are presented by the screen.*[6]

4 Ibid.
5 See Shklovsky reference in chapter one - pg.1.
6 John Izod. *Reading the Screen: An introduction to film studies.* Essex, Longman York Press. 1984. p.6.

The term Defamiliarization originated from the Russian Formalist critics, and according to Thompson[7], it is the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in our lives.

Art is just another way of seeing the world. Thompson[8] suggests it defamiliarizes our habitual perceptions of the everyday world. For example, a portrait of a person is not necessarily how all people would see this person in everyday life - not only for the obvious reason that it is posed, but also because the finished product is created through the eyes of the artist. In other words, any type of artwork, no matter how realistic it may seem, is merely one (or more) person's *opinion* of how it can be represented.

In regards to film, it could be said that the finished product is created through the eyes and minds of all the production crew, writers, producers, and the story writer. So even scenes, characters, representations and so on, that show something related to real life, are made unfamiliar to the audience, through the work of those who made it.

Film (and other art) also places material and ideas into a new context, and into unaccustomed formal patterns. For example, the narrative of a film is structured in such a way that the audience can easily follow the story, and so it fits into audience expectations, even if that is not exactly how it happened in real life. A good example of this is the film *My Left Foot*, where the events of a real life story were rearranged and changed in the film, so as to suit the audience's expectations. For example, in the true life situation the main character actually died, but to suit the audience, the film created a happy ending where he lived.

Partridge and Hughes[9] illustrate this story-telling process:

> *Think about your day so far. If you were to tell the story of your day are there events you would leave out? Why? Because they were boring? Because they were too personal? What makes you decide they are too boring, or too personal? Have you learned a series of assumptions about the proper elements to include in a story to be heard, watched or read by other people? Where would you get such a set of assumptions from? By*

7 See Thompson, p.11.
8 Ibid.

> *restricting your story, you do not give an accurate representation of your day, but a version of it from one point of view.*[10]

Thus, no film can be a direct, immediate reproduction of the outside world. Every film is constructed by the use of narrative, characterisation and other representative aspects which help to make up the overall system of a film. After these representations and ways of showing things have been seen by an audience over and over, the defamiliarizing capability of those processes diminishes, the material and formal patterns become familiar, and responses to them become automatic.

The use of flash backs is an example of an artistic approach that has become automatised, and the viewer has become able to 'read' the text without even thinking about it, or at least they think they do. For example, in the film *The Usual Suspects*, the narrative starts half way through the story and then progresses with the use of flashbacks, filling in all the narrative gaps and unanswered questions which the audience may have. Because, the use of flashbacks is a well used formal device, the audience does not have any problem piecing the parts of the film together to create the whole, as the viewers may have done when flashbacks were first used in a film.

Thus, the film critic needs to *bring to the attention* of viewers these devices, and to make them unfamiliar again, so as to give the viewer a better set of viewing skills and a solid base with which to work, and from which to explore wider issues. The whole point of defamiliarization is to help viewers to stop taking for granted everything that is presented to them on screen, and to remember that every element or device is worked into a film for a reason - nothing is done by chance.

Thompson[11] makes the suggestion that we can assume all art (including film) at least defamiliarizes everyday reality. Even in a conventional work (such as a documentary), the events are ordered and purposeful in a way that differs from reality. To the viewer it seems that what is seen on the documentary, is what has actually happened in real life, whereas in reality the sequences that make up the film may not have been filmed at the

9 D. Partridge and P. Hughes. *Flicks: Studying Film As Text.* Melbourne, Oxford University Press. 1992.
10 Partridge and Hughes, p.128.

same time, or even in the same town. Van Zyl[12] uses the example of seeing a child pick up a stone and throw it at something outside the frame of the picture, and one is shown a window breaking in the next shot, one simply concludes that the stone one saw being thrown broke that specific window. However, in reality, this may not be the case, as the two shots could have been months apart and kilometres apart, but because they were put together, they made sense.

In the popular (classical), mainstream films that many people watch, defamiliarization is more controlled, and hence it is often less extreme than in other types of films.[13] However, that is not to say that there is any less need to be aware of it and how it works.

According to J. Dudley Andrew[14], defamiliarization is the overall process whereby technique calls attention to the object. A crucial role of the analyst, then, is to defamiliarize ('make strange') our habitual perceptions so that every work, no matter how conventional, can shed it's familiarity.[15] This can be done by bringing to the attention of viewers the norms of the work that have become familiar or taken for granted.

3.3 AUTOMATIZATION

> *'Automatised' or 'overlearned' mental processes are 'beneath consciousness' in the sense that they are usually performed quickly and unreflectively, but they are 'conscious' in that they are accessible to reflection.*[16]

Automatization, as defined by Mayer[17], is the spectator's automatic responses when the devices utilised by the film have become so familiar that the 'strangeness ebbs away'.[18] This generally occurs through repetition and familiarity. For example, one of the most automatised narrative devices of the classical narrative film is the closure, especially the

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11 See Thompson, p.11.
12 See John van Zyl. p.15.
13 See Thompson, p.194.
14 J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction.* London, Oxford University Press, 1976. p.81.
15 Geoff Mayer, *A Return To Form: Russian Formalism and Contemporary Film Practice.* in Metro Magazine 1993, p. 23.
16 Murray Smith. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema.* Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1995. p.48.
17 See Geoff Mayer, 1993, p.23.
18 Ibid.

'happy' ending. This is an element of mainstream popular films that many people have come to expect.

Take a film such as Tom Cruise's *Jerry MaGuire,* an innovative romantic comedy that also deals with the realities and day-to-day issues of everyday life. It could have been very easy for this film to have finished with Dorothy and Jerry going their separate ways and getting on with the realities of life (namely that love doesn't really conquer all), but this ending would have left the audience feeling disappointed and incomplete. However, the fact that the film did have a happy ending, and that this is what the audience expected, whether the story warranted it or not, shows that the narrative device of the happy ending is taken for granted, and needs to be re-defamiliarized. As Thompson suggests,[19] the audience needs to be made aware of the strategies by which films encourage viewers to respond to them.

Thompson[20] also makes the point that a film may have been highly original at one point, but becomes automatised by many imitations, remakes or by repeated viewings. For example, the montage scenes used in *The Graduate* were at one time, extremely innovative and very unfamiliar to many people. However, over the years many other films have used montage scenes, thus making them familiar to audiences. The only way, according to Thompson[21], to keep a work reasonably fresh upon many repeated viewings is to look for different aspects in it each time, and this means developing new viewing skills that will allow us to form different kinds of hypotheses about all formal relationships - not just meanings.

3.4 THE ACTIVE SPECTATOR

No matter how we view artwork, whether we like it or not, art actively engages us emotionally and mentally. Thus one of the main principles of neoformalism is it posits that the viewers are active - that they perform operations.

19 See Thompson, p.33.
20 Ibid., p.32.
21 Ibid., p.34.

Because a work exists in constantly changing circumstances, Thompson[22] suggests an audience's perceptions of it will differ over time. Thus it cannot be assumed that the meanings and patterns noticed and interpreted in a film, will remain the same in the work, immutable for all time.

Instead, the devices - any single element or feature of an artwork - within the work constitute a set of cues that can encourage the spectator to act upon certain viewing activities; the actual form those activities take, however, inevitably depends on the work's interaction with the historical contexts of film and viewer. Therefore, according to Thompson, in analysing a film the neoformalist critic will not treat the film's devices as fixed and self-contained structures that exist independent of our perception of them.[23]

When a film is not being watched, it still exists physically in its material sense, of course, but Thompson[24] makes the point that all the qualities that are of interest to the analyst - its unity, its repetitions and variations; its representation of action, space and time; its meanings - can only result from the interaction between the work's formal structures and the mental operations the audience perform in response to them.

The viewer can thus be defined as Thompson[25] states, as a hypothetical entity who responds actively to cues within the film, on the basis of automatic perceptual processes, and on the basis of experience.

According to Bordwell[26] the organism constructs a perceptual judgement on the basis of non-conscious inferences. In other words, the spectator, through past experience with similar situations, is able to perceive and understand what is going on, without actually being aware of making 'non-conscious' decisions. For example, as Thompson[27] states, viewers recognise that shapes on the flat cinema screen represent three dimensional space, because they can rapidly process depth cues; unless the film plays with their perception, by introducing difficult or contradictory cues, they will not consciously have to think

22 Ibid., p. 25.
23 See Thompson, pp. 25-26.
24 Ibid., p 26.
25 Ibid., p.29.
26 Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film.* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press. 1985, p. 31.
27 Thompson, p.30.

about how to grasp the spatial representation. Similarly, viewers tend automatically to register the passage of represented time, unless the film uses a complex temporal layout that skips over, repeats, or otherwise juggles events, in which case they begin a conscious sorting-out process.

As suggested above, spectators past experience with film is important in helping them to understand many aspects. However, Thompson[28] makes the point that it is not only past experience with other films that is important, but also other artworks, everyday life, film theory and criticism - all provide us with countless learned mental patterns against which we check individual devices and situations in films. Thompson terms these mental patterns and past experience, *schemata.*[29]

3.4.1 Schemata and Backgrounds

Thompson[30] also points out that viewers actively seek cues in a work, and respond to them with viewing skills acquired through experience of other artworks and everyday life. And they do this through what Bordwell[31] has described as 'organised clusters of meaning' or 'schemata'.

According to Bordwell[32], as people develop within a society, the routines and patterns of the social formation construct internalised sets of expectations and habits which form their schemata. These schemata are *'learned mental patterns which develop from cultural, social and historical experiences and, in terms of the film viewing situation, provides a basis for the spectator to constantly form a series of probable hypotheses'*[33] - hypotheses about a character's actions, about the space off screen, about the source of a sound, about every local and large-scale device that we notice.

As the viewer watches a film and as the film develops, hypotheses that the viewer makes are either confirmed or disconfirmed; if the latter, the viewer then forms new hypotheses

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28 See Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Bordwell, pp32-33.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.

and so on. According to Thompson[34], this process of the spectator forming hypotheses helps to explain the constant activity they undertake, with the parallel concept of schemata suggesting why that activity is based in history, because schemata change over time. A good example to look at here is the final shoot-out scene in the 1963 film *Bonnie and Clyde*, and the difference in feelings viewers had when the film was first released compared with today. Because of the difference in eras, and because of the abundance of physical violence that now permeates our screens, the shoot-out scene that shocked audiences when it was first released, may not even cause a flinch in today's audiences, whereas it was a source of great controversy when it was first released.

So, it can be seen that people's individual backgrounds, and historical schemata, play an important part for the analyst in the sense that they are a significant consideration in viewer responses. The film can never be completely understood outside the context of history. Thompson makes the point:

> *Every viewing occurs in a specific situation, and the spectator cannot engage with the film except by using viewing skills learned in encounters with other artworks and in everyday experience. Neoformalism therefore grounds analysis of individual films in historical context based upon a concept of norms and deviations.*[35]

In regards to the teaching of film, the above quote raises a very important point in the argument for using the neoformalist approach, because it takes into account that every individual sees films differently depending on their knowledge, background and experiences. This, of course, becomes a valid point for a teacher who has a class of 30 or more individual students with different backgrounds and experiences.

Take for example, a film such as *Shindler's List*. Not every student in a class would view this film in the same way, because of their individual beliefs and experiences about the holocaust, or other issues of the film. One particular child may find the film abhorrent, because of a background connection and because they may have been taught that in some way it glorifies the atrocities that happened. Whereas another child may find the film a

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34 Thompson, p. 30.
35 Ibid., p.21.

blessing, in the sense that it provides a realistic portrayal of the events, and in the sense that in this horrific story, there was still a silver lining (if somewhat tarnished).

However, according to Bordwell[36], the film, or artwork, is also made so as to encourage the application of certain schemata, even if these must eventually be discarded in the course of viewing the film. So in other words, although every individual has their own past experience, and backgrounds, only certain bits will be needed for the understanding of each different film. In effect, as suggested by Thompson[37], the work then cues us in our responses, appealing not only to certain parts of viewer's schemata but to certain individuals as well. The analyst's task, then becomes to point out the cues and on the basis of them to discuss what responses would reasonably result, given a knowledge of the backgrounds of the viewers.

Therefore, in recognising film form, the audience must be prepared to understand formal cues through their knowledge of life and of other artworks. However, Bordwell and Thompson[38] ask the question: what happens if the two principles come into conflict? For example, in ordinary life people don't simply start to sing and dance as they do in musical films like *Grease* or *Evita*. Bordwell and Thompson go on to suggest that very often conventions demarcate art from life, saying implicitly, 'in artworks of this sort the laws of everyday reality don't operate'. So although *Evita* is a story about a true life person, it is still ostensibly a 'story', and thus can be told in any way the author so desires.

However, in discussing a film such as *Evita*, one must also take into account that very often, the most relevant prior experience for perceiving form is not everyday experience, but previous encounters with works having similar conventions. In other words, until a person has become acquainted with musicals and have grasped the different conventions that are applied within this genre, they may find they lack the particular knowledge and experience needed to understand and enjoy this particular genre.

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36 Bordwell, p. 32.
37 See Thompson, p.30.
38 Bordwell and Thompson, p.47.

Bordwell and Thompson[39] relate this to the example of a mystery story: If we expect a mystery story to eventually reveal the murderer, this is not because of life experience - many real-life crimes go unsolved - but because one 'rule' of the mystery genre is that the puzzle will be solved in the end. Like other art media, film often asks us to adjust our expectations to the conventions which a particular genre uses, such as with the musical or mystery.

3.4.2 Audience Expectations

> *If you are listening closely to a song on a tape and the tape is abruptly switched off, you are likely to feel frustrated. If you start reading a novel, become engrossed in it, and then misplace the book, you will probably feel the same way.*
>
> *Such feelings arise because our experience of artworks is patterned and structured. The human mind craves form. For this reason, form is of central importance in any artwork, regardless of its medium.*[40]

It needs to be make clear that a film is not just a random collection of elements. If it were, people would not care if they missed the beginning or ending of films, or if films were shown out of sequence. But, as was suggested in the above quote from Bordwell and Thompson, viewers do care, and do become frustrated by an interrupted song or an uncompleted story. Because many people have been brought up reading and listening to stories, spectators tend to approach a film with definite expectations.

For example, Bordwell and Thompson[41] state that we (as spectators) assume there will be such things as characters and some action that will involve them with one another. We expect a series of incidents that will be coherently connected in some way, and we expect that the problems or conflicts arising in the course of action will reach some kind of climax and resolution in the overall narrative. (These are of course all aspects of Classical

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p.41.
41 Ibid., p.83.

Cinema - a dominant cinema with a distinct approach to film form and techniques, recognised by Hollywood film makers - *see section on classical cinema*).

These different expectations and anticipation's are part of what Bordwell and Thompson[42] suggest make up an internal system or pattern that engages the audience's interest, by relating the different parts of the film in a certain way. Hence, frustration may occur if this pattern is interrupted in any way. (It is this system of relationships among the elements of a film which Bordwell and Thompson call **Form**).

This is not to say, however, that all films tell a story. We can still examine a non-narrative film's form, because a formal analysis merely entails analysing how the different parts of a film relate to one another in ways which fascinate us. However, for the purpose of this thesis, only popular narrative films have been chosen.

So how are all the different parts of a film related together to form a system or pattern? As suggested above, the artwork offers us *cues* which prompt the *active* viewer to perform a specific activity. Without the artwork's prompting, we could not start or maintain the process; and without our playing along, picking up the cues, the artwork remains only an artefact.

However, the viewer can respond actively to a film only to the degree that he or she notices its cues, and only if he or she has viewing skills developed sufficiently to respond to these cues. These cues are not simply random; they are organised into systems, such as *narrative* (the elements that make up the story), and *style* (the cinematography).

42 Ibid., p.22.

3.5 CUES AND VIEWING SKILLS

> *Much of the power of film arises from its ability to suggest a great deal of information in very few sequences.*[43]

The task of the neoformalist analyst is to find, and point out, the cues in a given film, and on the basis of what cues are found, discuss what responses would reasonably result, given a knowledge of viewers' backgrounds. Therefore a neoformalist critic analyses not just a set of static formal structures, but rather, a dynamic interaction between those structures and how a hypothetical viewer would respond to them.[44]

If an artwork largely reinforces our existing viewing skills, such as a mainstream popular film would generally do, spectators are not likely to notice how they employ schemata and form hypotheses because their responses are automatised, and something they take for granted. Thus certain films may seem simple to watch, and we may assume that we are 'naturally' able to view such films. However, Thompson[45] suggests that even while watching the most familiar film, we go through very complex operations in order to understand structures of causality, time and space. For example, if a film uses a lot of flashbacks, or flash forwards, the spectator sub-consciously arranges all the events into a linear story, as was suggested earlier.

Another way a film cues the spectator is through the use of **stereotypes**. As the above quote points out, much of the power of film arises from its ability to suggest a great deal of information in very few sequences. Thus, film often uses stereotypes in order to establish a character or setting quickly and economically in terms of narrative space and focus.

This can be done through the use of a particular actor/actress who plays a certain type of character most of the time, such as Harrison Ford. Or it can be done by giving a character particular stereotyped attributes, such as the gay characters are given in *The Birdcage*. By giving these characters the stereotyped characteristics of gay men, the narrative then does

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43 Partridge, D., Hughes, P. *Flicks. Studying Film As Text.* Oxford University Press, Melbourne. 1992. p.65.
44 See Thompson, p.30.
45 Thompson, pp. 30-31.

not have to spend so much time on the development of the characters, it can instead go right into the story.

However, although the use of stereotypes can be useful for both the film maker and the spectator, there are also some significant disadvantages as well. Partridge and Hughes[46] make the point that film is often criticised because the broad categories of character can prevent the creation of fully developed, complex characters. Also, over time, an audience may recognise certain narrow or even exaggerated characteristics as representing a particular group or point of view, which may result in a simplistic or inaccurate understanding of people and issues, especially racial or sexual issues. Using the example of *The Birdcage* again, this could be especially so, in the sense that there is a definite use of mainstream 'gay' stereotypes throughout the film which do nothing other than to reinforce the dominant ideology of the white heterosexual male. Of course, how individual spectators view this, again depends on their unique backgrounds, but it does reinforce the fact that the use of stereotypes as formal cues need to be brought to the attention of the film analyst.

Thus, the neoformalist approach, as mentioned earlier, can help a student respond actively to a film by pointing out the cues and by suggesting how the viewer might cope with them. For example, if a viewer is faced with a film that adheres to the norms of the popular (classical) cinema, the viewer may employ familiarised skills automatically and thus, through lack of interest, coast over many of the film's cues, especially if the film actually deviates from the norm at times. An example of where this may happen is in a film such as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* On the surface, this film may seem like any mainstream film, thus some people may employ the familiar skills needed for watching such a film. However, because this film is very complex and deep, and deviates from many of the principles of mainstream, popular cinema, a viewer may miss many of the important cues the film supplies in order to fully comprehend the film.

46 See Partridge and Hughes, pp.65-66.

3.6 EMOTION

FERDINAND (in French). I've always wanted to know what exactly the cinema is.

GIRL (in English). He says he wants to know exactly what is movies.

SAMUEL FULLER (in English). Well, a film is like a battleground.

GIRL (in French). The film is like a battleground.

FULLER. Yes...Love.

GIRL. Love.

FULLER. Hate.

GIRL. Hate.

FULLER. Action.

GIRL. Action.

FULLER. Violence.

GIRL. Violence.

FULLER. Death.

GIRL. And Death.

FULLER. In one word....Emotion.

Pierrot le fou (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)[47]

Emotion plays a large part in our experience of form. To understand this part, Bordwell and Thompson[48] distinguish between emotions *represented in* the artwork, and an emotional *response felt by* the spectator. For example, if an actor screams in pain, the emotion of pain is *represented within the film.* If, on the other hand, the viewer who sees the painful expression laughs (as the viewer of a comedy might), the emotion of amusement is *felt by the spectator*. Both types of emotion have formal implications.

Emotions represented within the film interact as parts of the film's total system. For example, the scream of pain the spectator hears from the character may be because they have just had a finger poked in their eye. However, if the film that is being watched, is a

47 Cited in *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema.* by Murray Smith (1995). Oxford. Oxford University Press.

48 Bordwell and Thompson, p.47.

comedy, then this pain may cause the emotion of laughter from the audience. Thus, the emotion of both the spectator and the actor within the film, must be taken in context.

In most films however, the emotion represented within the film is the same as that felt by the spectator. Thus, as Bordwell and Thompson[49] state, all emotions present in a film may be seen as systematically related to one another through that film's form.

It is the dynamic aspect of form that plays the part in engaging the spectator's feelings. This is caused when the audience is cued by the form of a film to have expectations, which are then either fulfilled or cheated. In most mainstream popular films, however, expectations are gratified, but sometimes the form of a film may work to disturb the audience's expectations, such as in films like *The Crying Game* or *Under Suspicion.*

It is the element of expectation that spurs emotions. To have an expectation about 'what happens next' is to invest some emotion in the situation. Film makers, although having a hand in directing audience's expectations have no positive way of directing their emotions. Bordwell and Thompson[50] suggest there is no general recipe by which a film can be concocted to produce the 'correct' emotional response. It is all a matter of context - that is, of the particular system that is each artwork's overall form. All that can be said is that the emotions felt by spectators will emerge from the totality of formal relationships they perceive in the work. This is one reason why one should try to perceive as many formal relations as possible in a film; the richer one's perception, the more exact and complex one's response may become.

Taken in context, however, the relations between the feelings represented in the film and those felt by the spectator can be quite complex. Take for example the scene from *Once Were Warriors* where Jake Heke beats up his good friend 'Uncle Bully'. In reality, the beating of a man with broken glass would be a horrific, stomach churning event, and is so constructed, in the film. However, because narrative elements leading up to this event, have made us despise the character, who raped and caused Grace to kill herself, whom we know to be Uncle Bully, the film also cues the audience to feel some kind of perverse

49 Ibid., p.48.
50 Ibid.

justice has taken place. Of course, the response felt by each individual will also be one that is directed by their own background and experiences, as well as the film's own cues.

3.7 MEANING

> *Like emotion, meaning is important to our experience of artworks. As an active perceiver, the spectator is constantly testing the work for larger significance, for what it says or suggests.*[51]

Some viewers approach a film expecting to learn valuable lessons about life. They may admire a film, because it conveys a profound or relevant message. Important as meaning is, though, this attitude often errs by splitting the film into the content portion (the meaning) and the form (the vehicle for the content).

The abstract quality of implicit meanings can lead to very broad concepts (often called *themes*). A film may have as its theme courage or the power of love. Such descriptions have some value, but they are very general because hundreds of films fit them, and because it takes the importance away from the whole film. For example, to say that *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* is a about growing up or fat people, would not do justice to the special qualities of the film as an experience. It would not take into account any of the special stylistic or narrational elements that help to make up the film, and would also reduce the complexities of the story.

Bordwell and Thompson[52] suggest that the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the *particular* and *concrete* features of a film. This is not to say that one should not interpret films, but one should strive to make one's interpretations precise by seeing how each film's thematic meanings are suggested by the film's *total* system. Once again, the emphasis is on the total system.

Generally, films have meaning only because we attribute meanings to them. We cannot therefore regard meaning as a simple product to be extracted from the film. Bordwell and

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51 Ibid., p.49.
52 Ibid., p.51.

Thompson[53] argue that as spectators, our minds will probe a film for significance at several levels, seeking to find any type of meaning, such as implicit, explicit, symptomatic and referential meanings (see glossary for definitions of different meanings). They go on to say, the more abstract and general our attributions of meaning, the more we risk loosening our grasp on the film's specific formal system. As analysts, it is important to balance concerns for the concrete system with the urge to assign it wider significance.

Many people when analysing a film will do so, purely to find out what the overall meaning of the film is, and can often misinterpret the dominant meaning of the film as being 'the dominant' (see later in chapter for discussion of 'the dominant'). However, according to Thompson[54] and in accordance with neoformalist analysis, meaning is not the end result of an artwork, but one of its formal components. Neoformalism assumes that meaning differs from film to film because it, like any other aspect of the film is a device.

3.8 STYLE

Style is another formal system of a film, which is important when looking at film analysis. However, like film form a whole book could be devoted to discussing it. Thus, this thesis will make no attempt to do justice to such a large topic, nevertheless it requires some explication and definition.

At its most basic level, style is the 'repeated and salient uses of film techniques characteristic of a single film or a group of films', which include elements such as lighting, camerawork, sound and so on.[55] Style then, is the formal system of the film that organises film techniques.

The spectator has expectations about style just as they do about form. Style plays a large part in cueing the spectator toward certain emotional responses and expectations about the story. Like other kinds of expectations, suggests Bordwell and Thompson[56], stylistic ones derive both from our experience of the world generally, and our experience of film and

53 See Bordwell and Thompson, p.52. for a more in depth discussion of the different meanings, and their significance.
54 Thompson, p.12.
55 Bordwell and Thompson, p.497.
56 Bordwell and Thompson, p.334.

other media. The specific film's style can confirm our expectations, or modify them, or cheat or challenge them. However, many films generally use stylistic techniques in ways that conform to our expectations.

The spectator may not consciously notice film style, but according to Bordwell and Thompson[57], it nonetheless makes an important contribution to the film's ongoing effect and overall meaning. When watching a film the effects of film style are registered, but they are seldom actually noticed. Thus, if we want to understand how these effects are achieved, we need to look and listen more carefully then we usually do.

The process by which the viewer may do this, is by looking for the role that style plays in the film's overall form by making obvious what stylistic devices are being used, what functions they are used for, and how they are motivated. Take for example, the stylistic device of sound. In looking at the function and motivation of sound in a certain scene in a film, questions may be asked such as: does the use of music or noise create a certain emotion or reaction in the audience?

Style, as does form, also shapes meaning. But Bordwell and Thompson make the point that there is no dictionary to which one can turn to look up the meaning of a specific stylistic element. Instead, the analyst must scrutinise the whole film, the patterns of the techniques in it, and the specific effects of film form. Bordwell and Thompson go on to say that meaning is only one type of effect, and there is no reason to expect that every stylistic feature will possess a distinct significance. One part of a director's job is to direct our attention, and so style will often function simply *perceptually* to get us to notice things, to emphasise one thing over another, to misdirect our attention, to clarify, intensify, or complicate our understanding of the action.

In summary, style serves to cue us about narrative information. According to Kristin Thompson,[58] style suggests the time and space within which the action is occurring, and it does so as unambiguously as possible. Style also places the audience in a favourable

57 Ibid., p.335.
58 Kristin Thompson, 1988. p.73.

vantage point for seeing and hearing everything that the narration presents us with to use in reconstructing the story.

3.9 TOOLS OF ANALYSIS

3.9.1 Devices

The word device refers to any single element, or feature, that plays a part in the art work, in this case the finished product of the film. A device can be anything from a camera movement, a frame story, certain lighting, dialogue, to a costume, or a theme, and so on. Thompson[59] makes the point that for the neoformalist, all devices of the medium and of formal organisation are equal in their potential for being used to build up a filmic system, and more importantly for this thesis, they are equal in their potential for defamiliarization.

The underlying strategies within a film are often camouflaged by devices, so it is important to look at the *function* and *motivation* of particular devices so as to be able to decipher what is really happening within the film.

3.9.2 Function

> *Viewers see certain functions and are so taken in by them and their eyes are so foiled by the apparent obviousness of the action that they never stop to ask 'Why do we believe that this or that is happening?'*[60]

Function, according to Thompson[61] is the purpose served by the presence of any given device. It is crucial to understanding the unique qualities of a given artwork, for while many works may use the same device, that device's function may be different in each work. It is risky to assume that a given device has a fixed function from film to film. For example, the use of *Abba* songs that Muriel plays to escape into her fantasy world in *Muriel's Wedding*, would not have the same effect in any other film, and would sound ridiculous if used in a Western or Horror movie.

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59 Ibid.

60 John van Zyl. *Image Wise - competence in visual literacy.* South Africa, Hodder and Stoughton Educational. 1987. p.15.

61 Thompson, p.73.

Two common devices that are often stereotyped as having the same function from film to film, are the use of bar like shadows - often connoting the feeling of entrapment, or rain on the window pane - often a metaphor for tears, can function differently within various films. The function of the devices need to be considered in the context of not only the scene they are a part of, but in the context of the whole film. Any given device serves different functions according to the context of the work, and one of the analyst's main jobs is to find the devices functions in this or that context.

Thompson suggests that functions are also important in relating the work to history. Devices themselves become automatised quite easily, and the artist may replace them with new devices that are more defamiliarizing. But functions tend to remain more stable, since they are renewed by a change of device and they persist longer historically than do individual devices.[62] Take for example, the use of lighting as a device. In many of the B-grade horrors of the 1930's and 40's, lighting, or the lack of it, often functioned as an emotional cue, scaring the audience with the power of their own imagination rather than what they could physically see on the screen. However, over the years, as technology has progressed other devices such as music and different special effects have replaced the old device of shadows, but have still retained the same function. Therefore the function of the device in context is usually more important for the analyst than the device as such.

Although devices perform functions in artworks, the work must also provide some reason for including the device to begin with. The reason the work suggests for the presence of any given device is its **motivation**.[63]

3.9.3 Motivation

Motivation is, in effect, a cue given by the work that prompts the viewer to decide what could justify the inclusion of the device. At its simplest, motivation operates as an interaction between the work's structures and the spectator's activity.

According to Thompson there are four types of motivation: **Compositional**, **realistic**, **transtextual** and **artistic.**[64]

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62 Ibid.

3.9.3.1 Compositional Motivation

Compositional motivation, according to Thompson[65], justifies the inclusion of any device that is necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space, or time. Most frequently, compositional motivation involves the 'planting' of information early on which the audience will need to know later. For example, in *Single White Female*, Hedra's box of private things is introduced to the audience as a clue to the compositional motivation of Hedra's character. But as to how and why this box is important, the audience do not find out until later in the film.

Geoff Mayer[66] suggests, compositional motivation is the most common form of motivation in the classical text. It helps to assure unity among the elements of a work. Mayer states that when this is applied to the cinema this type of motivation justifies the inclusion of any device that is necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space or time. Essentially, it establishes the internal 'rules' of the work.

Because the main point of compositional motivation is to ensure the unity and continuity of the story, plausibility is not something that is of great matter, and becomes something the audience are willing to overlook for the sake of having the story continue.[67] In other words, for the spectator, the matter of the story continuing is seemingly more important than the fact that what is happening on the screen is unrealistic and would be totally impossible in real life. For example, many action films such as the *Die Hard* series, or Steven Segal films, have either the 'goodie' or 'baddie' being so badly shot up or injured from falling off a 50 storey sky scraper, that in reality there would be no way possible they could get up and carry on. But because the character is a crucial part of the story line and the story must go on, spectators, tend to overlook this small fact of plausibility, in the hope that their expectations are still fulfilled. (See section on audience expectation)

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63 Ibid., p.16.

64 According to Thompson, p. 16., the Russian Formalists differentiated only three, and transtextual is not included in Boris Tomashevsky's seminal exploration of motivation in his "Thematics," in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, pp. 78-87. David Bordwell borrowed the term *transtextual* from Gerard Genette to account for how artworks appeal directly to the conventions established by other artworks - a types of appeal not explicitly covered in the original three categories. See Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 36.

65 Thompson, p.16.

66 Mayer, p.23.

67 Thompson, p. 16.

3.9.3.2 Realistic Motivation

Plausibility does however fall within the realm of realistic motivation, which, according to Thompson, is a type of cue in the work leading us to appeal to notions from the real world to justify the presence of a device.[68] Thompson goes on to say:

> *Our ideas about reality are not direct, natural knowledge of the world, but are culturally determined in various ways. Thus realistic motivation can appeal to two broad areas of our knowledge: on the one hand, our knowledge of everyday life is gained by direct interaction with nature and society; on the other, our awareness of prevailing aesthetic canons of realism in a given period of art form's stylistic change.*[69]

Thompson also suggests that since realistic motivation is an appeal to ideas about reality, rather than an imitation of reality as such, its means can be extremely varied, even within a single work.[70] A good example of the historical variation of realistic motivation is in a comparison of the two versions of *Cape Fear* (or any other film that has been re-released years after the original version). Because realistic motivation appeals to **ideas** about reality, and because the films were made in different eras, people have different ideas about what constitutes as realism. Thus, realistically motivated devices that were used in the early version of *Cape Fear*, such as the lighting of certain scenes, may not have the same effect in the more recent version, where the whole film takes on a darker tone.

3.9.3.3 Transtextual Motivation

Transtextual motivation involves devices appealing to conventions of other artworks. In effect, the work, suggests Thompson[71], introduces a device that is not motivated adequately within its own terms, but that depends on our recognition of the device from past experience. In classical or popular film in particular, types of transtextual motivation most commonly depend on our knowledge of usage within the same genre, our knowledge of the star or our knowledge of similar conventions in other art forms. A good example of

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68 Ibid.
69 Thompson, p.17.
70 Ibid.
71 Thompson, p.61.

this, discussed by Thompson[72], is the lengthy build-up to the shoot-out in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. The build-up is not realistic, nor is it necessary for the narrative, as a quick exchange of gunfire would have settled the issue. But, as Thompson suggests, having watched countless westerns, it becomes evident that the shoot-out has become a ritual of the genre, and thus the author treats it as such.

Thompson makes the final point that transtextual motivation, then, is a special type which pre-exists the artwork, and upon which the artist may draw in a straightforward or playful way.[73]

3.9.3.4 Artistic Motivation

This form of motivation is the most difficult type to define. In one sense, every device in an artwork has an artistic motivation, since it functions in part to contribute to the creation of the work's abstract overall shape - its form.

One of the most prominent elements of artistic motivation is that it often exposes the fictional or artistic structure of the work. This is sometimes associated with a strong case of artistic motivation called the *baring of a device*. Here, the formal function of a given device or structure in the work is foregrounded, or 'bared'. An example of this is where a character in a film speaks directly to the camera, and thus directly to the audience, such as Christian Slater does in the film *Pump up the Volume*. This type of motivation may jolt the audience back to reality, reminding them that what they are watching is not the reality of actual events that have happened, but merely a constructed story. It also has the ability to make the spectator feel uncomfortable in the sense that they may feel what is being said is pointed directly at them.

Mayer[74] suggest that artistic motivation is most apparent when stylistic relationships dominate, and interrupt, the spectator's story-constructing activity.

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72 See Ibid., p.18.
73 Ibid., p. 19.
74 Mayer, p. 23.

3.9.4 Summary

> *Formal devices serve a variety of functions, and their presence can be motivated in one or more of the four possible ways. Devices can serve the narrative, can appeal to similar devices familiar from other artworks, and can defamiliarize the structures of the artwork itself. Meaning, as a device, may also serve any of these functions. Some artworks foreground meanings and invite us to interpret them.*[75]

It is never just 'natural' that a film maker would put any given device into a work, no matter how realistic a film may seem. Nothing is done by chance, thus the concepts of function and motivation become central for the analyst.

Thus the analyst, in formulating an appropriate method, must decide what type and degree of interpretation is appropriate to the overall analysis. But analysis of function and motivation will always remain the analyst's central goal, and it will subsume interpretation.[76]

3.10 THE DOMINANT

According to Thompson[77], the dominant is one of the neoformalist critic's most important tools. The basic definition is simple enough - *the dominant is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others*[78] - however, in practice, the dominant can be a difficult concept to apply. This is because, there can often be a number of controlling principles at different points within a film, thus it may not be clear which is the overall dominant.

Thompson goes on to explain the concept further in saying that the dominant has come to mean the concrete structures within the work of foregrounded, defamiliarized devices and functions, interacting with subordinated, automatised ones. From the spectator's

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75 Thompson, p.20.
76 See Ibid., p.21.
77 Ibid., p.89.
78 Ibid.

perspective, it may be said that the dominant governs the perceptual-cognitive 'angle' that we are cued to adopt in viewing a film against its backgrounds.[79]

The dominant is also crucial in relating an artwork to history. According to Tynjanov:

> *A work enters into literature and takes on its own literary function through this dominant. Thus we correlate poems with the verse category, not with the prose category, not on the basis of all their characteristics, but only of some of them. The same is true, concerning genres. We relate a novel to 'the novel' on the basis of its size and the nature of its plot development, while at one time it was distinguished by the presence of 'love intrigue.*[80]

As the above Tynjanov passage suggests, the dominant as a concept can be applied to individual works, to authors, and even to general artistic works such as poetry or the novel.

In applying Tynjanov's theory to cinema, individual films and groups of films take on their own literary function through the dominant as well. This can be seen through the different genres. For example a Western is related to 'the Western' by the fact that it has a certain type of setting, with certain stereotypical characters, and follows a general plot and story development. Whereas other films that do not necessarily fit into a particular genre, may be dominated by a certain type of ending, or authorial style.

For example, Thompson[81] suggests that since an artist frequently uses similar dominants from one work to the next, we often can generalise about the dominant of his or her overall outputs as well. Thompson goes on to say that groupings larger than a single artist's works are often made around dominants, and the basic features of those dominants tend to be widely recognised elements. For example, the dominant of verse was for a long time bound up with rhyme, though the blank and free verse forms have challenged that

79 Ibid., p.91.
80 Yuri Tynjanov - cited in Thompson. Pp. 91-92.
81 Ibid., p.93.

traditional view. Dominants provide the means of studying historical changes in both small and large-scale models.[82]

Thompson[83] also makes the point that the dominant is a guide to determining prominence, both within the work, and in the work's relation to history. By noticing which devices and functions are foregrounded, we gain a means of deciding which structures are the most important to discuss.

Similarly, in comparing the work to its context, we can determine through the dominant its most notable relationships to other works. Without some such notion, we would be condemned to study every device in a film with equal attention, for we would have no way of deciding which were the more relevant. Of course, according to Thompson,[84] most critics *do* make the intuitive assumption that some elements or structures are more important in a work than others. But the dominant as a tool allows us to examine such relations explicitly and systematically.

3.11 THE NEOFORMALIST CRITIC

Neoformalist critics, such as Bordwell and Thompson, often deal with highly original challenging works. However, one of the goals of the neoformalist approach is also to take familiar, even cliched films and create a new interest for them - to 're-defamiliarize' them.[85] Take for example the classic film *Casablanca*. Over the years, many of the scenes and sayings of this film have become cliched, so when people of today watch the film for the first time, the magic of the film is lost in preordained conclusions. Thus the aim of the neoformalist critic is to re-defamiliarize people to the film, by returning the film to its historical context and applying different schemata and so on, to it.

Again, it is important to remember the point made by formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, that the aim of the formalist method, or at least one of its aims, is not to explain the work, but to call attention to it, to restore that 'orientation' towards form which is characteristic of

82 See Thompson, p.94.
83 Ibid., p. 92.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., p.32.

a work of art.[86] In this sense, suggests Thompson,[87] the neoformalist critic can take a familiar film, and point out its underlying strategies - strategies usually camouflaged by motivating devices. The analyst can thus encourage the viewer to perceive the film in a more active fashion that the film would seem at first to warrant.

One important point that the neoformalist critic makes is that the approach treats audience response as a matter of education about awareness of norms, not as a matter of passive acceptance of norms imposed by the makers of popular films.[88] Thus, one of the aims then, of neoformalist analysis, is to place at the disposal of the spectators certain skills - skills that allow them to become more aware of the strategies by which films encourage spectators to respond to them.

Therefore the critical analysis of a film, seen through the eyes of a neoformalist, is simply a tool for helping the student (spectator) to do better in the area of the arts, by widening the range of their viewing abilities. In the case of familiar films, this process can consist of pointing out in the work, additional cues and patterns, as the potential objects of a more active understanding. For more difficult films, the neoformalist critic can help develop new viewing skills.

The building up of viewing experience takes time, and we may need to see a number of films of a given type before we begin to be comfortable with their challenges. Indeed, Thompson[89] suggests, people who have been nurtured on an almost exclusive diet of classical films may simply reject the notion that film viewing should be challenging and even difficult.

Neoformalist theory does not want to explain a film, but to send the reader back to it and to other films like it, with a better set of viewing skills.[90]

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86 Shklovsky, Victor. "Pushkin and Sterne: Eugene Onegin" cited in Thompson, p. 32.
87 Thompson, p.32.
88 See Ibid., p.32.
89 Ibid., p.33.
90 Ibid.

3.12 SUMMARY

This chapter has briefly gone over many of the important aspects that need to be discussed in the analysis of a film. The advantages of using the neoformalist approach can be seen in the sense that the approach shows that a film has form, and that every film is seen as unique and worthy of study in its own right. Neoformalism also sees spectators as having an active role in watching a film, which essentially comes from their individual backgrounds and experiences.

The approach also foregrounds the fact that films are a constructed medium that should not be taken for granted. Every device or element within a film is there for a reason, having its own function and motivation which enables it to be studied in terms of where it fits into the total system of the film. And finally it grounds analysis of individual films in an historical context based upon a concept of norms and deviations.

The next chapter will deal with the educational application of the material from this chapter, using mainstream, popular (classical) films that are familiar and potentially interesting to secondary school students. However, before being able to apply this material to films there needs to be a discussion of how a mainstream film is made up and how it ultimately works.

Thus the first section of the next chapter will be devoted to discussing the classical narrative of popular films, with the following sections being devoted to the breaking down of neoformalism's academic terms and applying it to the teaching of film analysis in senior New Zealand secondary schools.

Chapter Four: Applying Neoformalism to teaching film.

A film educator should help children learn how to learn.[1]

4.1 INTRODUCTION: WHERE TO START?

We can avoid evaluation by not setting rigid guidelines about what, when, why and how to teach specific films. Instead we should explore the individual aesthetic of each film in order to remain flexible and inductive.[2]

As discussed in the previous chapters, a film has its own form, language and kinds of meaning which help to make it a unique and special type of experience. Therefore, films should not necessarily be taught by using the techniques that succeed in other subjects. Richard Lacey[3], makes the point that when movies are taught deductively or as if they were literature, the sense of interaction - of art - which is so important, is lost in translation. In other words, by teaching students deductively, there is the danger that the teacher may, without realising it, become an arbiter of taste, reducing films to their own opinion. Students may then be reduced to passive recipients of information, which, in turn, can stifle their creativity and ability to think for themselves.

Lacey[4] also argues that a film experience should not be reduced to a few neat lessons. Films communicate by images and sounds organised around elements of composition, rhythm, pace, lighting, colour, music and so on, and the interaction of these elements,

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1 Lacey, Richard A., *Seeing With Feeling: Film in the Classroom.* Philadelphia, W.B. Saunders Company. 1972, p.2.
2 Ibid., p.15.
3 Ibid., p.11.
4 Ibid.

calling on both thought and feeling, is, according to Lacey, the essence of the film makers art. However, audiences see movies in vastly different ways, and no package of discrete concepts or interpretations can encompass all those ways of experiencing. Although it may be true with any form of art, the student's emotional investments in an intense film experience is essential to analysis, and makes it especially difficult for anyone to get by with conventional approaches, especially those used for teaching other subjects.

Chapter one argues that film is a constructed medium, which consists of aesthetic and cultural systems that characterise important features of the individual work. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson[5] make the assumption that *Classical* Hollywood filmmaking constitutes such systems and is thus easy to use for the purpose of analysis. Hence, for the purpose of this thesis, mainstream, popular film, or *classical* cinema will be used for discussion and application of the neoformalist approach.

4.2 CLASSICAL CINEMA

> *In the final analysis, we loved the American cinema because the films all resembled each other.* - Francois Truffaut[6]

Classical Hollywood cinema, prominent from the 1920's until the 1960's, is still one of the most widely used and influential forms of cinema today. At its most basic, classical Hollywood cinema generally constitutes the vast body of films that are classed as popular and mainstream, and is the basic context by which many people judge the cinema. Thus, for the purpose of teaching, popular films are by far the easiest to teach because, most, if not all people already have a familiarity based on an awareness of conventions.

An important base from which to start in regards to teaching about classical narrative structure, is that the classical text is not just a random series of images and sounds, but a 'deliberate structure designed to provide pleasure by diverting attention away from considerations of its point of view and underlying values',[7] and thus the different systems

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5 See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film style and mode of production to 1960.* London, Routledge. 1985. p.4.

6 From 'Sept hommes a debattre', Cahiers du cinema, no.150-51 (December 1963-January 1964) p.16. Cited in Bordwell et al. 1995. p.4.

7 Geoff Mayer. *Film As Text.* Queensland, Jacaranda Press. 1994. p.1.

that are at work. The classical film text attempts to restrict attention to character, story and theme.

Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer[8] suggest that there are seven main principles involved in Classical Hollywood films. These are summed up in the following statement:

> *The commercial appeal of the classical cinema resides in its ability to emotionally involve a larger number of people. This is partly achieved through character-centred, goal-orientated stories, but it is also the product of the specific narration process that encourages the successive formation of hypotheses that are essentially based on audience expectations that have been formed, or learned through the repetitive narrative conventions central to these expectations in the role of climax, the emotional and/or physical pivotal moments within the narrative structure that occurs just prior to the resolution.*[9]

In more general terms, the key narrative features of classical mainstream cinema involve:[10]

- *Narrative, spatial, temporal coherence* (cause and effect). All subplots and narrative elements are interconnected and lead smoothly to a climax and logical resolution.

- *Strong initial exposition.* A strong opening credit sequence that sets up narrative cues which create expectations within the audience about what is going to happen.

- *Goal-oriented, character-centred stories.* Storytelling is primarily undertaken through the actions of the characters and their striving to deal with the conflicts and obstacles they must overcome to achieve their goals.

- *Narrative repetition, retardation and redundancy.*
repetition - certain cues are repeated for emphasis
retardation - the holding back of information to create suspense

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8 McFarlane, B., Mayer, G. *New Australian Cinema.* Cambridge University Press, Australia. 1992.
9 Ibid., p.15.

redundancy - reinforces suspense type feelings

- *Morally polarised, emotionally excessive form.* Everything generally fits into the categories of 'good' and 'bad', 'sad' and 'happy' and so on, to the extent of being excessive. Conflicts within the narrative are built up to such a climax, that when they happen, the audience is ready to fully emotionally identify with them.

- *Motivation* - a multiple motivation that generally privileges compositional, generic and realistic motivation over devices that expose the narration process, such as artistic motivation, where the device may be laid bare. To focus attention on the story, irrelevant or unrelated content is left out, and no significant action is left unexplained.

- *Climax and Resolution* - there is great emphasis on the climax and resolution in the overall narrative structure, significantly the act of restoring stability and happiness again.

The number of possible narratives is unlimited, but as suggested above, historically the cinema has tended to be dominated by a single mode of narrative form, referred to by Bordwell and Thompson as 'Classical Hollywood Cinema'[11]. It is this narrative that will be discussed in this thesis.

Classical Hollywood films are so numerous and so familiar that people often tend to assume that they are simple in their formal strategies. But, as Thompson[12] points out, the apparent simplicity of average films suggests another reason why analysts may avoid them: what could there be to say about them? However, this is precisely why they need to be studied. Although classical films lack notable originality, they have their own type of complexity, autonomized though they may be.

As mentioned above, classical cinema is designed ultimately to provide pleasure by diverting attention away from techniques employed to make the film and put it together.

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10 See McFarlane and Mayer, p.15.
11 Bordwell and Thompson, p.82.
12 See Kristin Thompson, 1988. p.51.

To do this, Thompson[13] advises that a classical film motivates its devices thoroughly to serve the narrative in a way that least appears to be unified to the viewer.

Thompson goes on to say then, that the motivated artwork (of which classical film would be one type) has two major formal patterns. Firstly, it has the devices relating to the creation and sustainment of the narrative (for example, *redundancy*, *repetition* and *retardation*); and secondly the motivations overlaid on these devices that have the overall function of concealing their operations. This double layering of motivation is, according to Thompson[14], what makes classical films complex, while at the same time contributing to their appearance of simplicity. Thus, as Chapter Two mentions, the function and motivation of devices are an essential part of analysis for the film student.

4.3 NARRATIVE FILM

> *Stories surround us. In childhood, we learn fairy tales and myths, As we grow up, we read short stories, novels, history, and biography. Religion, philosophy, and science often present their doctrines through exemplary stories...Plays tell stories, as do films, television shows, comic books, paintings, dance, and many other cultural phenomena. Much of our conversation is taken up with stories of one sort or another - recalling an event from the past or telling a joke...We cannot escape even by going to sleep, since we often experience our dreams as little narrative, and we recall and retell the dreams in the shape of stories. Perhaps narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world. - Bordwell and Thompson*[15]

According to Bordwell and Thompson[16], the prevalence of stories in our lives is one reason that we need to take a close look at how films may embody *narrative form*. The narrative is a major aspect of a film's form, and is made up of a plot and story. At its most basic, the narrative is the moment-by-moment process that guides us in building the story

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p.52.
15 Bordwell and Thompson, p.64.
16 Ibid.

out of the plot. The plot may arrange cues in ways that withhold information for the sake of curiosity or surprise (retardation) or it may supply information in such a way as to create expectations or increase suspense (redundancy). Filmmakers have long realised that the spectator's interest can be aroused and manipulated by carefully divulging story information at various points.[17]

Bordwell and Thompson[18] go on to say that because stories are all around us spectators approach a narrative film with definite expectations, generally with anticipations that are characteristic of narrative form itself. For example, the spectator often assumes there will be characters and some action that will involve them with one another, and a series of incidents that will be connected in some way. The spectator also expects that the problems or conflicts arising in the course of action will reach some kind of resolution or final state, and so on. As the spectator watches a film, they are able to pick up narrative cues, remember information, hypothesise about what is going to happen and generally participate in the creation of the film's form. Accordingly, it is the way a film engages the spectator in this active participation that is of interest to the film analyst.

Thus, in examining a narrative film, it is important to start by identifying the various causes and effects, the character's goals, the principles of development, the degree of closure at the end, and other basic components such as story-plot differences or motivations. The best way to start with this is by making a general summary of the film, of its plot and story, so there is a concrete base from which to work.

Thompson and Bordwell[19] suggest in their book *Film Art*, that it is important to establish a *segmentation* in order for the film to be cut into sequences to make it easier to study. Sequences are usually shown by cinematic devices such as fades or cuts, or black screens and so on, enabling the film to form meaningful units. In a narrative film, the sequences constitute the parts of the plot. A segmentation then, according to Bordwell and Thompson,[20] is simply a written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters. If then, a narrative has ten

17 Bordwell and Thompson, p.75.
18 Ibid. p.65.
19 See Bordwell and Thompson, p.59.
20 See Bordwell and Thompson, p.87. for an example of plot segmentation in *Citizen Kane*.

scenes, then each scene can be labelled with a number running from one to ten. Bordwell and Thompson go on to say that it may be useful to divide some parts further into sub-parts such as '1a' and '1b'. Segmenting a film enables the analyst not only to notice similarities and differences among parts but also to plot the overall progression of the form.

Thompson and Bordwell[21] suggest that all analysis implies breaking something down into its component parts. Thus in general, there are three aspects of a film that should be discussed in terms of analysing it - the film's functions (and motivations), its effects on the audience, and its meanings (ideology). The final analysis, then, should show how these arise from the interaction of the parts that make up the film's formal and stylistic systems.

The very force of narrative often makes it difficult for even the trained viewer to stand back and observe what is really going on. However, one way to sharpen a students sense of the functions of specific techniques, and to defamiliarize them, is to *imagine alternatives* and reflect on what differences would result. In other words, ask questions like those posed by Bordwell and Thompson[22] such as: suppose the director had made a different *narrational* choice; how would this create a different effect? For example, if the director of *Seven*, or another detective-style film, had chosen not to use compositional motivation throughout the film to plant information, would the film have worked?

4.4 Tools Of Analysis

4.4.1 Imagining Alternatives

One of the simplest ways of foregrounding, and putting into practice the concept of defamiliarization, is to look at the function and motivation of different devices within a film, and then to get the student to imagine alternatives to these devices. The point of the exercise is to draw attention to the things the students take for granted and assume are obvious, so the process of defamiliarization can begin.

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21 Ibid. p.443.
22 Bordwell and Thompson, p.337.

It is important to keep in mind that the audience are conditioned into certain structures, such as the following examples will show. The point of drawing attention to the elements of the film that the audience tends to expect, or have expectations about, is to show how we have been *conditioned* to have these expectations. Thus it is important to look at what happens when these conventions are altered.

By suggesting alternatives to different aspects of the film, the things the audience may take for granted because of their expectations, can start to be made unfamiliar. The notion of audience expectations and their automatic responses to filmic devices is central to the concept of defamiliarization and deconstruction.

The significance of defamiliarization then, lies in the concept of automatization, and the way a spectator gains knowledge of cinema devices through past experience with film itself and also with life in general (schemata). Once a person learns this information and gains the knowledge, according to Murray Smith[23] the knowledge becomes what they *see with* but seldom what they actually *see*. Take for example, the ritual of a handshake. Most people do not think about the handshake as they participate in it because it is so familiar and automatised. The ritual of the handshake, according to Smith[24] becomes automatised because of the continual reinforcement by the cultural context in which it is a norm. However, in a different culture with a very different ritual of introduction, one would be 'conscious of' the handshake schema, which in essence causes the action to become *defamiliarized*. By relearning and becoming aware of the patterns that have been learned and hidden beneath the conscious, the spectator and film analyst can begin to understand the formal principles of filmmaking, and can 'make strange' that which has become familiar.

4.4.2 Function And Motivation

So what elements can be discussed in the defamiliarization process? Basically any element within the film, although it is often beneficial to start with a major element such as a narrative device. The thought to keep in mind here is that the classical system has a habit of automatising each central device, so the point of the exercise is to defamiliarize

23 Murray Smith, 1995, p.49.

these devices by breaking them down and making them seem unfamiliar again, which is where the concepts of function and motivation become central.

In regards to the function of a particular device, the student must remember that the same device can be used differently within different films. It is risky to assume that a given device has a fixed function from film to film. Take for instance the example used in Chapter Two, where *Abba* songs in *Muriel's Wedding* are used to signify Muriel's escape into her fantasy world. It would be highly unlikely that every film to ever use *Abba* songs would be using them as a function for the main character to escape into a dream world.

The student should also recall that the function of a particular device always goes hand in hand with the motivation, that is, the reason the film has for including that device. Generally, at least in classical or popular film, the reason for the inclusion of a particular device will be motivated either by the story (compositional motivation) or by reality (realistic motivation), or a combination of both.

The following discussion will examine some examples of different devices within films and the significance of offering alternatives to how they are generally used. The discussion has been broken down into the central concepts of narrational devices and stylistic devices, and although it is somewhat artificial to consider these concepts and their devices separately, the approach taken here uses such a fragmenting technique for ease and convenience. But it is on the assumption that one can study these devices in isolation without losing sight of their interdependence or their relationship to the whole.

4.4.3 Narrative Devices

> *Think about your day so far. If you were to tell the story of your day are there events you would leave out? Why? Because they were boring? Because they were too personal? What makes you decide they are too boring, or too personal? Have you learned a series of assumptions about the proper elements to include in a story to be heard, watched or read by other people? Where would you get such a set of assumptions from? By*

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[24] Ibid.

> *restricting your story, you do not give an accurate representation of your day, but a version of it from one point of view.* - Partridge and Hughes[25]

As mentioned in an earlier quote by Bordwell and Thompson, stories surround people, no matter where they live or where they go, so that narrative can be seen as a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world. However, because of the prevalence of stories in the world, the formal principles of narratives, or stories, are often taken for granted because they are so familiar.

One of the most taken for granted concepts of the narrative lies in its definition, in that a story is merely an account or a representation of events, it is never exactly what happened, or exactly how the original story was told. Thus, it must be kept in mind that a narrative is totally constructed and mediated through the use of specific devices and techniques.

The next section of this chapter will look at some automatised narrational devices used in creating a story (plot and story, characters, endings, and so on), and in creating a particular response from the audience (stereotyped characters, costuming, and so on), and will discuss how they can be relearned and defamiliarized, by looking at their function, and how they are motivated.

4.4.3.1 Plot And Story

One of the most valuable procedures, according to Thompson[26], for analysing narratives is the distinction between the plot and the story. The differences between the plot and the story are important and also very useful in the process of defamiliarization, as they are largely autonomised.

At the most basic level the plot is the structured set of the causal events as they occur in the film, which in many cases will be presented to the audience out of chronological order, such as when flashbacks are used. Thus it is the audience's job to rearrange these events mentally into order, so as to make sense of them, and thus create the story. The story then,

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25 Partridge and Hughes, p.128.
26 Thompson, p.41.

relies on the active participation of the audience for its creation, whereas the plot is created ostensibly by the filmmaker.

A good method for the students to get the grasp of the differences between plot and story, is by getting them to write out the plot of the film - that is describing everything as it occurs in the film, and then getting them to write out the story - how we rearrange the events to make sense of them. They will then be able to see the vast difference between the two narrational devices, where the order, duration and frequency of events in the story generally differ greatly from the way the plot presents the events. Therefore, this process of describing plot and story, although seemingly meaningless at first, actually helps the student to see how the audience actively participates in forming the story. Without the spectator's active participation, the narrative would be nothing more than a jumble of scenes.

A useful film to use for this exercise would be one with flashbacks, as the story lines are never linear, in the sense that they jump around from present to past, filling in the gaps. Courtroom dramas such as *A Time To Kill* and *A Few Good Men*, often use flashbacks as a way of opening up trial scenes in the courtroom. By writing out the events of a film with flashbacks and then writing out the actual storyline, one can discover the sub-conscious process the spectator engages in as events are re-organised so they make sense.

It can be seen then that one of the functions that a plot performs is to present or imply story information which mentally cues the audience in creating the story, and which in classical cinema, is of course, generally motivated by the demands of the story.

4.4.3.2 Ending/Resolution

Classical narrative cinema, as mentioned above, is ultimately centred on characters and their efforts to achieve the goals they set up at the beginning of the film. For example, in *The Rock* the goal of the protagonists is to disarm the rockets that are set to wipe out half of San Francisco. Accordingly, there comes to be great emphasis on the ending and resolution of a film for the audience, in the sense that it brings together all the pieces of the film into a whole. It is essentially the moment when the most important information that the narration may have been withholding is finally revealed, and (in classical cinema)

generally confirms the audience's expectations with the achievement of the character's goals. Essentially then, as Geoff Mayer[27] suggests, the function of the ending is to provide the last link in a coherent chain of cause and effect.

To try and break down the familiarity of the classical ending that many people have come to expect and thus take for granted, the question may be posed: what happens if there is no climax or resolution to a film's story? For some people this can destroy the whole film. This is because the general filmgoer tends to expect (in a mainstream classical film), the film to not only tie off any loose ends, but also create an ending which is generally happy and morally up-building. Thus when the ending of a film is depressing, or sad, or justice does not prevail and the bad guys end up winning, the expectations of the spectator may be cheated. *The Grifters* and *The Last Seduction*, are primarily classical texts that destroy the expectations of the audience, in the sense that the 'baddies' win, and justice does not prevail.

However, it is important to note that in discussing audience expectations, the genre of the film must be taken into account. Mayer[28] makes the point, for example, that although the traditional classical ending is 'happy, there can be deviations from this overall pattern depending on the genre of the film. For example, the ending of a gangster film is not necessarily happy, in that the fate of the central protagonist, the gangster, is usually death. However, this does not generally ruin the film, because the audience normally expects this.

The ending of a film also serves an ideological role as well, so when justice prevails at the end of a film, it sets the scene for the upholding of justice in reality as well. Bordwell and Thompson[29] propose that any film combines formal and stylistic elements in such a way as to create an ideological stance, whether overtly stated or only implied. To discuss this notion fully, would require another thesis, but in short, the *ideological function* of a film is a further important.

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27 Geoff Mayer, A Return to Form, 1994. p.23.
28 Mayer, 1995, p.64.
29 Bordwell and Thompson, p.424.

4.4.3.3 Characters

The main agents that sustain the various causal events of the narrative are the characters. Because characters seem to be a 'natural' part of a story and because audiences are so familiar with the concept of characters and character-types, the general film viewer takes little notice of how a character is constructed or why a particular character is even present.

Thompson[30] makes the point that characters should not be thought of as real people, but more as collections of character traits. Thus characters should not be judged by the standards of everyday behaviour and psychology, but rather, as with all devices, they must be analysed in terms of their functions in the work as a whole. No matter how much a character may strike a viewer as being like a 'real person', that impression can always be traced back to a set of specific, character creating devices. For example, in *Philadelphia*, the Tom Hanks character is made to seem as real and natural as possible, so that the audience is able to identify with him and thus respond emotionally to the film. However, in reality, Tom Hanks is merely a made-up character that has particular character traits according to the character's function within the film, which is in relation to an ideological position regarding AIDS and homophobia. Thus in films like *Philadelphia*, the characters are not simply in the film as characters, but as part of an overall ideological structure.

There can be various functions for characters within different films. Characters may function as providers of story information or they may provide the means for withholding information, or even as suggested above, as part of a social statement. They may also function as a means by which certain camera shots can be used, or for creating parallels within the story. However, within classical cinema they tend to have only one or two motivations. The inclusion of particular characters is generally motivated by reasons of plausibility (realistic motivation), so as to make the story more real, or for narrative reasons (compositional motivation), to help with the flow.

Thus in looking at how one can use the device of characters to help in the process of defamiliarization, one must look carefully at how a particular character is used within the story, and why they are used, instead of merely taking it for granted that they are 'naturally' meant to be there.

This raises another important question about characters, namely: why was a particular actor or star chosen to play the part of a certain character?

4.4.3.4 Casting

> *Casting is one of the most important aspects in making a film. A film can live or die on it. The cast has to bring those characters to life. If you miscast a character, or one stands out wrong, you can throw the whole picture out of whack.* - Clint Eastwood[31]

According to Joseph Boggs[32], when someone considers going to a movie, the first question they usually ask has nothing to do with the director or the cinematographer, but with the actors: "Who's in it?" This is a natural question, because the art of the actor is the most clearly visible one that commands most of our attention. Film stars are used to bring audiences to the cinema, and many actors, suggests Geoff Mayer,[33] have an established persona, based on previous roles, which creates expectations within the audience before the film even begins. This of course, is something that is taken for granted by the audience, until of course, a viewer's expectations are not met.

Thus, in trying to defamiliarize the familiarity of certain actors in certain roles, the question may be posed: what happens in a film if casting is reversed? Film viewers in general, are more intent on people and characters rather than issues, so if the ultimate good guy such as Harrison Ford were to suddenly be cast as the bad guy, the chances are that the film would not work, or would not be as successful.

The changing of common stereotypes or *type-casting* within the movies can also change the emotional pull of a certain kind of film. Much of the power of film arises from its ability to suggest a great deal of information in very few sequences, thus a film often uses stereotypes in order to establish a character quickly and economically. However, when the expectations about a certain type of character are not fulfilled for some reason or another,

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30 Thompson, p.40.
31 From "Eastwood" American Film, December 1982, p.47. in Joseph Boggs, 1985, p.218.
32 Joseph Boggs. *The Art of Watching Film* (2nd edition) California, Mayfield Publishing Company. 1985. p.206
33 Geoff Mayer. Approaching Film Studies: Muriel's Wedding and other films. in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*. Vol.2., No. 1. 1995. p.58.

the story does not work. For example, Tommy Lee Jones is an actor who always tends to play a rather rough, tough or bad character, and to put him in a weak and soft role would be going against conventions, and would not quite 'cut to the chase' as far as the emotional involvement of the audience is concerned. This is because the audience have been conditioned to expect a certain kind of role from Tommy Lee Jones, and if this expectation is not upheld, then the reality of the story suffers.

Boggs[34] argues that if an actor repeats a similar role two or three times, the qualities that the actor projected in the role may take on mythic qualities, and the actor may become a figure on which moviegoers hang their fantasies. If this happens, Boggs goes on to say, the moviegoing audience not only expects, but demands, that the role be repeated again and again with only slight variations. To the audience, anything else is a betrayal, a personal affront to those who have developed what to them is a very personal relationship with a fictional character or character-type.

The nexus between character and actor is very important, so it is imperative to draw attention to the fact that people are conditioned to narrative structures and traditions, thus having certain expectations about what character type a certain actor should play, or what actor should get the role of a certain character type. If this is kept in mind, then the process of defamiliarization will be thoroughly underway, with the viewer becoming more aware of the totally constructed nature of the narrative and thus cinema in general.

4.4.3.5 Costume

Classical film, as mentioned, signals narrative and moral cues through many different agencies, of which costume is one. Costume is thus a narrational element that functions not only to help place the film into a particular setting and time period, but also to help tell the story, by cueing the audience in certain responses toward characters and their personalities. It does this, not only by appealing to the viewer's own life experiences, but also by appealing to the traditions of the cinema itself. The range of specific functions of costume within a film is vast.

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34 See Boggs, 1985. pp.224-225.

One obvious stereotypical function of costuming is as a metaphor for personality traits. This can especially be seen in the silent films from the beginning of the century, where the audience was able to tell the villain from the hero and heroine by the shade of the clothes they wore. Generally the antagonist was in black and the protagonist was in white. Because there were no words to help tell the story in these old films, the narrative relied on elements such as costume, lighting and music to help tell the story.

It has been said that a picture paints a thousand words, and this is often true of costuming within a film. Costuming not only helps the audience to distinguish between the 'good' and 'bad' characters and the surface personality traits of different characters, it would also be hard for the audience to distinguish different personality changes within individual characters.

Change in costume for a particular character often functions as a story-telling device. Allen Rowe[35] suggests that subtle changes in the costume of a single character can be used to signify changes of status, attitude and even the passing of time. Rowe uses the example of the 1930's gangster movies, such as *Scarface*, where the rise of the gangster, and his increasing separation both from his roots or from 'acceptable society', are exemplified by a change to clothes that are signifiers of affluence, if not taste. The change in costume for a character is then motivated by a transformation in personality.

Costumes are not used just to make the film look attractive and realistic, they are compositionally motivated to help tell the story. Hence, it is again important for the process of defamiliarization, that the analyst becomes aware of the strategies employed through the use of costumes to cue the audience toward certain responses, so that these can be made unfamiliar again.

4.4.3.6 True Stories

The deconstruction of true stories is another good example of how defamiliarization can be especially practical if it is a book to film adaptation, because there are concrete examples to refer to when discussing the differences, and they should generally fit well

into the school curriculum. When using a book to film adaptation, however, it is important not to teach the film as if one would in an English class. One important aspect of teaching film analysis that must be remembered, is that film must be taught in and for itself, so as not to lose the sense of interaction and art that accompanies each film.

'True' stories are useful for discussing the process of defamiliarization in the sense that they can show the total constructedness of film. A good example of this is *My Left Foot*. The film professes to be a true story, but ultimately it is not, because, although it draws upon many narrative conventions that are designed to emphasise the 'reality' of the story (including dates, titles, actual people), the film organises and structures the events of this person's life into a conventional and predictable story according to traditional filmic conventions.

My Left Foot along with other 'true' stories, or films that are based on true stories, such as *Awakenings*, are never an accurate representation of the real events because firstly and most obviously, no film can ever be a direct, immediate reproduction of the outside world. And secondly, the process of filmmaking, in the case of a true story, involves a process of selecting, re-ordering, and dramatising specific incidents from a person's life in order to create a coherent and entertaining story which the audience expects, and can easily make sense of. This sense of coherence is achieved largely through motivating each aspect so that it appears to unfold 'naturally' within the terms of the story, which is of course, a major feature of classical narrative film that has become largely autonomised.

Thus a useful approach for the film student or analyst is to write down the chronological order of the events that occur in reality, and then write down the events as they are portrayed in the film, and thus see how much they were changed and moulded to conform to mainstream popular expectations.

4.4.3.7 Stopping The Film

Another method of defamiliarizing students to a film is by stopping the film at certain points to see if the audience can predict correctly what is going to happen. The classical

35 See Allen Rowe, Film Form and Narrative in *An Introduction to Film Studies* edited by Jill Nelmes. London,

narrative is characterised by its emphasis on coherence and unity, and by the way it supplies cues and *clues* to what is going on in the story. Thus, in a popular, classical and traditional film like *Sleepless in Seattle* most people would be able to make a fair prediction of the ending, and the majority of them would be right in their predictions. By stopping a film at certain points and asking the viewer to make a prediction, it can help to defamiliarize people to the constructedness of not only the filmic techniques used, but also the narrative techniques, that is, how the story is put together in such a way that it confirms the expectations of the audience, without destroying the pleasure in watching.

One can make the assumption then, that as people watch more films, aware of the fact that it may be possible to predict the ending, they sub-consciously push these thoughts to the back of their minds so as not to ruin the rest of the story. By becoming aware of this subconscious process, the viewer is able to defamiliarize more of the constructed elements of the narrational process.

Narrative is an important structure in many films, but it must be made clear that every narrative presented in a film will be created by the use of film techniques, or *style*. Thus, the next section of this chapter will discuss some stylistic elements that have been autonomised through the classical narrative feature film.

4.4.4 Stylistic Devices

> *From the moment the camera intervenes, a form of manipulation begins.* - Jean-Louis Comolli[36]

When audiences see a film, they do not participate only with the narrative, but have conscious and/or sub-conscious responses to stylistic techniques as well. Thus, the way a film is put together is something that must be discussed when studying a film as a whole, although it should be make clear that a film's style should be studied apart from the film's narrative form, as its effect can only be seen within the context of the story that is being told.

Routledge. 1996. p.99.

36 Jean-Louis Comolli. Cahiers du Cinema 209, 1969, in *Realism and the Cinema*. edited by Christopher Williams. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. p.226.

It is not possible to do justice to the thousands of stylistic devices used in films. However, in classical feature films, filmic techniques generally support and enhance the narrative, thus for the purpose of this thesis, a number of stylistic devices will be chosen as examples of how film techniques help to tell the story and how the audience has become so accustomed to them, that they no longer have to consciously work out what their function is.

Although seldom conscious of the fact, film viewers tend to have expectations about style. For instance, Bordwell and Thompson[37] suggest, if a film viewer sees two characters in a long shot, they generally expect a cut to a closer view. If the actor walks to the right, as if about to leave the frame, the viewer expects the camera to pan or track right to keep the person in shot. If a character speaks, the audience expects the movement of the mouth to match the sound of the words that are heard.

Consequently, stylistic elements need to be defamiliarized, which can also be done by looking at alternatives to technical devices that have been autonomised by the classical system. Thus the question may be posed again: suppose the director had made a different *technical* choice; how would this create a different effect? For example, the New Zealand film *Vigil* is a story about Tess, a pre-pubescent girl entering the world of womanhood. This dark and foreboding story is told through the naive and confused eyes of this troubled teenager, by the use of the classical point-of-view shot. The audience, as result of this device, is offered innocent insight into the angst of a lonely girl struggling to find her role in life, by having us look at the world from Tess's point-of-view. If however, the director Vincent Ward, had chosen not to show Tess's point-of-view, and had instead used a more omnipresent voyeuristic technique of placing the camera as if it were from the audience's point-of-view so it seemed the audience could have been spying on the sexually developing girl, the story may have taken on an almost perverted and incestuous tone, rather than one more of identification and empathy.

37 Bordwell and Thompson. p.334.

4.4.4.1 Camera Shots

A film is ultimately a collection of shots put together into a spatially and temporally coherent narrative. Thus camera positioning and shots have the important function, in the overall classical system, of being the building blocks of the film - the first pieces in the chain reaction impelling the spectator to undertake a particular work.

Thus, in attempting to make unfamiliar the camera shots of the classical cinema that most film viewers take as 'natural', the question could be asked: what would be the result if a director shot a film on a static camera, using only one angle and one focus? Unless the film was an artistic documentary which studied the growth of a single plant over a year, the film would obviously not work. It would be hard to make sense of the story, it would be unrealistic, and the audience would become bored, not to mention the fact that it would challenge the audience expectations. Just the simple act of moving the camera helps to construct what the audience sees. Film would take on a totally different feel if the camera was held static. Not only can a camera move its focus and angle, but the camera itself can also move.

Classical cinema camera shots generally strive to be as naturalistic as possible and replicate the natural movements of the eye. The predominant style of Hollywood filmmaking is the use of a camera which is largely invisible, having camera shots that are predominantly motivated by the action or the interest of the characters. Every shot is selected from a range of possibilities, even when it continues to appear to be the 'natural', the only, one.

Sometimes camera movements work to overtly draw the audience's attention to things. For example, near the beginning of the film *The Last Outlaw*, after the renegades rob a bank, the camera moves from the face of one of the 'nicer' outlaws, played by Dermot McUlvery (who becomes a kind of protagonist) and then hovers in what seems to be a pointless shot of the bank teller's miniature hand gun, which has been knocked to the floor. However, even though the spectator does not see the outlaw pick the gun up, the juxtaposition and length of the shots are long enough to register in the mind of the spectator, that this is something significant. The anticipation of what motivated this shot is found near the end of the movie when the protagonist is about to be killed. He has run

out of ammunition and when a gunshot is heard, the audience fear the worst, until they see the reappearance of the little gun, and realise the 'good guy' won. Thus what seemed, in the beginning to be a pointless shot, was actually motivated by the narrative to help bring the closure of the film.

The functions and motivations of different shots or the 'language' of the camera is, according to Rowe[38], something that has had to be both developed by the filmmakers and 'learnt' by the audience. So often, when a particular camera device is used that a spectator has not seen before, or is not familiar with, the spectator lacks the knowledge of how it functions and how it is motivated, therefore they are unable to relate it to the film as a whole.

However, as suggested above, classical or popular cinema, prides itself on the invisible nature of the camera work, along with other techniques, thus making the process of defamiliarization even more important, because almost everything about the classical film is automatised. What follows are a few examples of autonomized camera shots that are often used in classical cinema and which are often taken for granted.

Shot-reverse-shot - is a natural (naturalised) way of showing people in a conversation. There is no logical reason for this, it is just a tradition that the film industry has kept to and that we can accept. There is no distinct reason why a conversation cannot be shown front on, or from a bird's eye point of view. If another camera shot is used, because tradition has conditioned us to expect the shot-reverse-shot, the reality of the film again becomes jeopardised, in the sense that it draws attention to itself by deviating from the norm.

Point-of-view shot - is a (naturalised) way of helping to put the viewer into the shoes of a particular character, thus providing the audience with the visual viewpoint and emotional intensity felt by a character participating in the action. At its most basic, the point-of-view shot determines what position and through what kinds of 'eyes' the camera, and thus the viewer, sees the action.

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38 Allen Rowe, p.103.

Because, this shot is also a shot that many people have come to expect, if it is not used, then viewers expectations may be disappointed, and the viewer will not be able to identify emotionally with the characters and the story.

Focus and Camera Angles - throughout films, there are hundreds of different camera angles and foci that all have different functions and motivations within certain contexts. However, because the classical narrative film strives to be as unobtrusive and natural as possible, the function and motivation of certain camera shots become easily learned and then taken for granted.

Consequently, to return these devices to their original unfamiliar state, the film analyst must step back from them and relearn them, so as to be aware of how they work. The simplest way to do this is to again, imagine alternatives to these devices, thus the question may be posed: suppose a director chooses to shoot a whole film using one focus; how would this effect the film? Obviously, the story would be ruined and the reality of film would be jeopardised.

A useful exercise to show how focus in a film is important in conveying narrative information, but is generally taken for granted, and thus is to compare how a film is put together with different shots, with how the human eye works. For example, it would be impossible for a person to look at the world in one focus, because we are continually adjusting our eyes to suit the situation, just as a film continually adjusts its camera shots to suit a certain scene.

The angle of the camera is also important in conveying narrative information. For example, when the film wishes to suggest that a character is frightened or scared the camera often positions the audience as if they were looking down on the character so that they look vulnerable or weak. Or when the film needs to suggest a character's strength or power, the camera may shoot slightly upward so that they appear larger than other characters. Again, a good exercise for making the student aware of the way camera angle is employed in telling the story, is by imagining the effect of a film if it were shot using only one angle.

The camera shots then help to tell the story by striving to be as 'natural' as possible. Even though the spectator is not consciously aware of this, they still manage to understand what each angle or shot means and how it contributes to the telling of the story.

4.4.4.2 Lighting

Lighting of film is the first of the 'invisible' codes of cinema. - Allen Rowe[39]

Lighting is another element of film that is taken for granted. Viewers instinctively respond to lighting but seldom actually think about it. However, lighting can be one of the most important contributing aspects to the overall feel of the film and the story, and the film analyst needs to be made aware of this.

According to Bordwell and Thompson[40] much of the impact of an image comes from its manipulation of lighting. In cinemas, lighting is more than just illumination that permits the audience to see the action. Lighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and thus guide our attention to certain objects and actions. A brightly illuminated patch may draw the eye of the viewer to a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail or build up suspense about what may be present.

Bordwell and Thompson go on to say that we are used to ignoring the illumination of our everyday surroundings, so film lighting is also easy to take for granted.[41] Yet the look of a shot is centrally controlled by light quality, direction, source and colour. The filmmaker can manipulate and combine these factors to shape the viewer's experience in a great many ways, thus it is important for the analyst to become aware of the lighting norms that the audience have come to expect, and to imagine alternatives to these in order to defamiliarize them.

However, one thing that needs to be kept in mind is that like the endings and resolutions of film, lighting differences are also dependent upon different genres. Take for example a horror film or a thriller, which are generally darkly lit and shadowy to add to the fear and

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39 Ibid., p.102.
40 Bordwell and Thompson, 1993, p.152.
41 See Bordwell and Thompson, 1993. p.157.

suspense. What would happen if alternative lighting was used? Because the audience has come to expect a horror film to be dark and shadowy, if everything was brightly lit, with no shadows whatsoever, it would be nearly impossible to create the same effect of fear and suspense. The same goes for a family movie, such as *Lassie* or a Walt Disney movie. If the film was shot in a sparsely lit, shadowy way, the tone of the film would not be the warm, and happy one that is generally so of a mainstream family movie.

4.4.4.3 Music And Sound

Music itself can act as narration.[42]

> *Music has a tremendous effect on our response, greatly enriching and enhancing our overall reaction to almost any film. It accomplishes this in several ways: by reinforcing or strengthening the emotional content of the image, by stimulating the imagination and the kinetic sense and by suggesting and expressing emotions that cannot be conveyed by pictorial means alone.*[43]

Film is primarily a visual medium. Its areas of greatest significance and interest are generally communicated through visual means, which is why, suggests Joseph Boggs[44], sound and music are easily taken for granted. However, sound plays an increasingly important role in the modern film, because its here-and-now reality relies heavily on the three elements that make up the soundtrack: sound effects, dialogue, and the musical score. These elements, according to Boggs[45] create additional levels of meaning and provide sensual and emotional stimuli that increase the range, depth, and intensity of our experience far beyond what can be achieved through visual means alone.

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42 See Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., and Thompson, K. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960.* New York, Columbia University Press. 1985. pp. 33-35.

43 Boggs, p.191.

44 Boggs, Joseph. M. *The Art of Watching Films* (2nd Edition) California, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985, p.166.

45 Ibid.

Functions of Music

> *Music functions as an integral or complementary element. In spite of its direct affect on us, however, there is general critical agreement on one point: The role of music in film should be a subordinate one. The two most general and basic functions of the musical score are to create structural rhythms and to stimulate emotional responses, both of which greatly enhance and reinforce the effect of the image.*[46]

A *non-storytelling function* of the music score, Boggs[47] suggests, is to disguise or cover up weaknesses in acting and dialogue. When such defects are evident the director or composer can use heavy musical backing to make weak acting or banal dialogue appear more dramatically significant than it otherwise would. An example of this can be seen in the classic horror film *Jaws*. To cover up the weakness of using a mechanical shark, the scenes where Jaws attacks people are foreshadowed and accompanied by a dramatic musical piece basically consisting of two bars that increase in volume and pitch ('do do - do do - do do') which have, over the years, epitomised the fear of the unseen ocean monster, even when used completely out of context, such as in an advertisement.

Music is also often employed as a kind of *emotional punctuation* for the dialogue, expressing the feelings and underlying mental state of the characters. This is evident in many emotional or romantic scenes, where a character is unable to find the exact words they want to say, and so a song, or an emotion-evoking musical piece is played saying everything the character is unable to say. A good example of this occurs in the film *Philadelphia*, where Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks), a lawyer with AIDS, lets his emotions (along with the audience's) flow to the intense sound of Maria Callas singing an aria from Spontini's opera *La Vestale*. The music in this scene appeals to the senses of the audience through its profound passion, leaving the viewer to be moved through the power of their own imagination and emotional experiences, which punctuate the feelings that Andy Beckett is having.

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46 Ibid., p.191.
47 Boggs, p.194.

Thus music can often be used to *tell an 'inner' story*. When a director is unable to express things through verbal or pictorial means music can assume a primary storytelling function. For example, in the popular Hollywood film *The Bodyguard* the words of many of the songs tell the story of the character's hidden emotions. The words of the songs become the character's implicit dialogue, telling the audience how they really feel underneath, even if their explicit dialogue is telling us otherwise.

Foreshadowing events or building dramatic tension: Any time a surprising change of mood or unexpected action is about to take place on the screen, we will almost always be prepared for that change by the musical score. Foreshadowing or tension-building music deliberately plays on our nerves in a variety of ways; by gradually increasing in volume or pitch, switching from a major to a minor key, or introducing percussion instruments and dissonance. Again the film *Jaws* is a good example of this, as the audience know that the shark is arriving, by the use of the (now clichéd) piece of music that signifies the shark.

Sound Effects and Background Sound

Since we are more consciously aware of what we see than what we hear, we generally accept the soundtrack (background sound) and sound effects of a film without much thought, responding intuitively, as Joseph Boggs[48] suggests, to the information it provides while ignoring the complex techniques employed to create those responses.

The intricacy of a finished soundtrack is illustrated by Leonard Bernstein's description of the sound mixer's contribution to a single scene from the 1950's classic, *On The Waterfront:*

> *For instance, he may be told to keep the audience unconsciously aware of the traffic noises of a great city, yet they must also be aware of the sounds of wind and waves coming into a large, almost empty church over those traffic noises. And meantime, the pedalling of a child's bicycle going around the church must punctuate the dialogue of two stray characters who have wandered in. Not a work of that dialogue, of course, can be lost, and the*

48 Ibid.

> *voices, at the same time, must arouse the dim echoes they would have in so cavernous a setting. And at this particular point no one (except the composer) has even begun to think how the musical background can fit in.*[49]

Five different layers of sound are at work simultaneously in this brief scene, each one contributing to the total effect.

Invisible Sound

Boggs[50] suggests that the creative use of invisible sound is important to the modern film for a variety of reasons. To begin with, many of the sounds around us in real life are invisible, simply because we find it unnecessary or impossible to look at their sources. Realising this, film maker's now employ sound as a separate storytelling element capable of providing information by itself. Sound used in this way complements the image instead of merely duplicating its effects. For example, as Boggs[51] suggests, if we hear the sound of a closing door, we can tell that someone has left the room, even if we do not see an accompanying image. Thus the camera is freed from what might be considered as routine chores, and can focus on the subject of the greatest significance.

As demonstrated by the description of the scene from *On The Waterfront* above, invisible sounds (such as the sounds of city traffic, wind and waves, and the child's bicycle) are routinely used to intensify the filmgoer's sense of 'really being there'. Thus, by encircling the viewer with the natural sounds of the scene's immediate environment, the soundtrack suggests a reality beyond the limits of the visual frame.[52]

Sound as transitional

According to Boggs[53] sound can show the relationship between shots, scenes or sequences, or to make a change in image from one shot or sequence to another seem more fluid or natural. The most obvious example of this is in popular (classical) films, where sound bridges the gaps between scenes, so as to make the editing of shots as invisible as possible.

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49 Bernstein, Leonard. In Boggs, p. 166.
50 Boggs, p.171.
51 Ibid.
52 see Boggs, p.171.

Rather than fade a scene out, sound makes it possible to jump from scene to scene within a film, without actually disjointing the story. An excellent example of this is in a prime scene in *What's eating Gilbert Grape?* Gilbert and his family are watching a melodrama on television, with very dramatic sound and music which is building up to a crescendo for the climax of the film. One of Gilbert's sisters comes in and tells them that Mr Carver is dead, and as the film cuts to Gilbert in his truck, parked at the death scene, the music of the drama carries over and climaxes, not only to bridge the two scenes together, but also to help tell the emotional side of what has just happened.

Dialogue

> *A major part of our attention to sound in the modern film will naturally be directed toward understanding the dialogue, for dialogue gives us a great deal of important information in most films.* - Joseph M. Boggs[54]

Dialogue, like all other technical elements of a film, is a feature that is often taken for granted. Because of technology and the nature of film, dialogue is generally used as realistically as possible. However, because film is primarily a visual medium, Boggs[55] suggests that filmmakers must use dialogue with great restraint to avoid repeating what has already been made clear visually.

Again, a good way of defamiliarizing people to how dialogue is usually presented, is to imagine the effect of an alternative presentation. For example, what happens if the dialogue fails to complement the visuals and repeats verbally what has been made clear visually? Generally the filmmaker will end up with a comedy on their hands, such as *The Naked Gun*, where everything is over-emphasised for comic effect. However, if this was to happen in a serious genre, the film would obviously not work. Take for example a film such as *Forrest Gump*. If everything in this film had been explained through the use of dialogue, the film would have completely lost its beauty and poetic effect.

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53 Ibid., p.182.
54 Joseph M. Boggs, p.167.
55 Boggs, p. 167.

Furthermore, film's dramatic power and cinematic qualities are both diminished if dialogue is used to communicate what could be expressed more powerfully through visual means. Again, the dramatic musical scene in *Philadelphia* is a good example here, as words simply could not express the intense emotion both the character, and thus the audience, were feeling. Only the crescendo of Spontini's opera piece could do this. According to Boggs,[56] this is not to say that dialogue should never dominate the screen. But it should do so only when the dramatic situation demands it.

Voice Over Narration

A human voice off screen, called voice-over narration, has a variety of functions. It is perhaps most commonly motivated by the story and used as Boggs[57] points out, as an expository device, conveying necessary background information or filling in gaps for continuity that cannot be dramatically presented. Some films such as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* use voice-over narration only at the beginning to give necessary background, place the action in historical perspective, or to provide a sense of authenticity. For example, Gilbert Grape (Johnny Depp) establishes the tone of the film when he makes the comment about Endora, the small town where he lives: "Describing Endora is like dancing to no music. Its a town where nothing much ever happens and nothing much ever will."

Defamiliarizing Sound

Because music within a film is taken for granted, and because, as we have seen, music has many important functions within a film, it becomes an excellent device to use for defamiliarization.

The simplest way of defamiliarizing the spectator to sound is to show a film, or segments of a film, without any sound. Most, if not all, popular films lose their effect and potency with no sound. Not only does the lack of sound hinder in the narrational process, but it also effects the viewer's emotional response to the film. Take for example, a horror film, or thriller. By showing these types of film without the sound, much of the scary or

56 Ibid. p.168.
57 Boggs, p.183.

suspense scenes lose their effect. For example, the music from the old time classic of *Jaws* still manages to raise the hair on the odd person's neck, but if the crucial shark scenes are shown with the sound off, the film starts to look as fake as it really is, because there is no real emotional pull to help with creating reality.

Another useful example is the classic shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Without the spine-chilling and eerie screech of the violins piercing the viewer's ears, the shower scene becomes almost tame, especially compared with today's murder scenes. This scene from *Psycho*, also raises the point that the simplest, most obvious way to emphasise a sound is to increase its volume. For example, the shower scene in *Psycho* shows how the violence of the scene is amplified and intensified by the exaggerated sound environment. Thus, to defamiliarize a viewer to sound, it not only has to be turned completely off, but it is necessary to experiment with the effect of different volumes.

A useful task then for the students, is to find a crucial scene in a film, especially where the music plays an important part, and then show it with the sound turned on and then off, or even just with the sound turned down, just to see the difference in effects and to show the students how easy it is to take it for granted, and just how significant a part sound really does play.

The same sort of tasks can also be used for defamiliarizing the musical score and the dialogue of a film. A comparison of some silent films with films of today may be useful here. Silent films, such as Buster Keaton's *The Great Train Robbery*, are especially useful for looking at the story telling function of music.

It is important to note however, that it is not just major emotion-rousing scenes that the spectator needs to be defamiliarized to the sound, but also the background sound in the everyday scenes. These sounds are extremely important for the reality and continuity of the film, and are something even the film analyst takes for granted. However, as is suggested above, using the example from *On The Waterfront*, background sound is totally constructed, and also aids in the spectator's emotional response to the overall effect of the film.

4.4.4.4 Editing

Having established some of the different narrative and technical elements that contribute to the understanding of a film, the concept of how all of these elements are put together needs to be discussed.

Aesthetically, editing is one of the cinema's most obvious specific traits in the sense that it is an art involving both the combination and arrangement of elements. Bordwell and Thompson[58] make the point that editing is not necessarily the most important film technique, but it contributes a great deal to the film's organisation and its effects on viewers.

In popular Hollywood cinema, the role of editing is to combine and arrange the elements of the film in the least disruptive and most invisible way, more commonly termed 'continuity editing'. According to Thompson,[59] the continuity editing system is one central set of devices used for constructing a clear understanding of narrative information, which helps to form a viewer's response, therefore being an important aspect in the process of defamiliarizing a film.

According to Bordwell and Thompson[60], a feature length Hollywood film typically contains between eight hundred and twelve hundred shots, and this fact alone suggests that editing strongly shapes viewers' experiences, even if they are not aware of this. Take for example a chase sequence in a film. Van Zyl[61] suggests that when a viewer sits on the edge of their seat in fear during a chase sequence, it is most likely because the editing has been done in a certain way, with the shots getting shorter and shorter so that tension is increased.

4.5 SUMMARY

Viewers register the effects of a film's formal and stylistic elements, while rarely ever actually noticing them, thus if the film student wants to understand how these effects are

58 Bordwell and Thompson, p.246.
59 Thompson, p.73.
60 Ibid.

achieved, they need to look and listen more carefully than usual. To do this, as this chapter has discussed, they need to look at the function and motivation of the different devices within the film, which again is prompted by looking at the effects of the film for the viewer, and by then imagining alternatives and reflecting on what differences would result.

As can be seen by imagining alternatives to certain devices, every device has its own function and motivation within the context of a given film, and when these are altered, often the film does not work. One thing that must be kept in mind here, is that when discussing a classical narrative feature film, the motivation of every device in the film is ultimately determined by the demands of the story as the presentation focuses the audience's attention on issues relating to the character and the plot and away from the actual way in which the story is told.

In regards to the notion of defamiliarization, it must also be remembered that defamiliarization is an effect of the work, rather than a structure, therefore it will never be static among works, but will change from film to film, and within different historical periods. Thus, it is important for neoformalist critics to learn broad tools of analysis that can be used flexibly to suit their approach to the specific film in hand.

The end result then, of a neoformalist analysis is to be able to determine the principles by which a film is put together, how these various parts relate to one another to create a whole, and what effect this has on the audience.

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61 John van Zyl. *Image Wise - competence in visual literacy.* South Africa, Hodder and Stoughton Educational. 1987. p.16.

CHAPTER FIVE: Sample Analyses

Criticism is not an activity limited to those people who write articles or books about films. Any person who seeks actively to understand a film he or she sees is engaged in a process of criticism. You may be unsure, for example, why one scene was included in a film; your search for the function of that scene in the context of the whole is a first step in a critical examination. - Bordwell and Thompson[1]

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Up to this point, this thesis has looked at both the definition and academic principles of the neoformalist approach in Chapter One, as opposed to using any other contemporary approach or a given method. Chapter Two and Three have looked at ways in which a film's form effects the experience of the audience and by the way it creates a special sort of involvement on the part of the viewer, along with the different tools of analysis and the different elements that can be used to defamiliarize a film. But as Thompson and Bordwell[2] recommend, the only way for a student to gain ability to analyse films is through practice in viewing films critically and reading analyses by other critics.

For this reason, this thesis will include two brief sample essays on the films, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and *Once Were Warriors*. The reasons for choosing these two particular films are that although primarily they are classical popular narratives, they also deviate slightly from the traditional classical narrative with which most people are familiar.[3] Also

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1 Bordwell and Thompson, 1993, p.360.

2 Ibid.

3 It should be noted here that film is a visual medium, thus the teacher needs to be able to show the student examples rather than just explain them. Therefore films should be chosen for analysis that are readily available on video. The teacher should also get the students to talk about certain elements themselves or to write about them, rather than didactically teach them.

both of these films would generally be used in secondary schools for teaching themes and social issues within English or Social Studies curriculum's, rather than to teach about film itself, or cinema in general. While this thesis does not discount these approaches, the purpose of these analyses is to defamiliarize the constructed nature of film, and show how these films are made up and how they work to create the issues. To learn something of the methods by which a film has been put together is to discover some of the means by which those who made it tried to shape the audiences understanding of it, and the issues it may raise.

The basic premise then, is to start from the film itself and work out to the other issues and ideas. It must be pointed out here, that the neoformalist approach to teaching film studies offers a wide variety of possibilities in its application, and the two analyses in this chapter will not attempt to cover every possibility, but will focus on one or two aspects for demonstrative purposes.

When attempting to analyse a film, it is important to keep in mind then, that an analyst usually examines a film with some sort of purpose in view. Bordwell and Thompson[4] suggest that the analyst may want to understand a film's perplexing aspects, or reveal the process that created a pleasurable response, or even convince someone else that the film is worth seeing. Thus the first step in analysis should be to decide what prominent feature(s) of the film are of interest and would be useful to concentrate on, such as the dominant (which in classical cinema is usually something like narrative causality). In doing this, the film analyst is able to find a place to begin, but of course does not discount other points of interest that arise throughout the analysis.

Of course, one of the most important points to remember is that the aim of the formalist method, or at least one of its aims, is not to explain the work, but call attention to it, to restore that 'orientation towards form' which is characteristic of a work of art.[5]

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4 Bordwell and Thompson, p.360.

5 See Victor Shklovski "Pushkin and Sterne: Eugene Onegin", translated by James Holquist, in 20th Century Russian Literary Criticism, edited by Victor Erlich. New Haven, Yale University Press. 1975. p.68.

WHAT'S EATING GILBERT GRAPE?

Gilbert: *'Describing Endora is like dancing to no music. Its a town where nothing much ever happens and nothing much ever will'*

5.2 NARRATIVE FORM IN *WHAT'S EATING GILBERT GRAPE?*

5.2.1 Classical or Non-Classical?

As suggested in earlier chapters, perhaps the most basic distinction one could make about the form of a film lies in whether it is a classical popular film, or not. This foregrounds the notion that a viewer's experience of a film depends heavily on the expectations they bring to it, and the degree to which the film confirms them. Therefore, without any prior knowledge about a film, the audience generally still expects that it will obey certain norms and rules of popular mainstream cinema, purely because it is a Hollywood film. *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, however, is a film that somewhat cheats the audience of these expectations, by seeming to deviate from the classical tradition that ensures commercial success.

One of the most significant differences between *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and a typical classical feature film is summed up in Gilbert's comment above, about Endora being a town where nothing much ever happens. This off-hand comment could, in effect, be used to sum up the whole film. Whereas the commercial appeal of the classical cinema resides in its ability to emotionally involve a larger number of people, through elements such as discussed in the previous Chapter (cause and effect, character-centred, goal oriented stories, and so on), *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* seems to avoid the causal and goal-oriented narrative structure, in preference for a more digressive narrative that appears to treat the different events of the film as separate, and not causally linked. Character's goals and desires are not always articulated within the film, the principles of development are not always clear, conflicts are not quite resolved, and the ending in particular does not provide the degree of closure that a viewer would expect in a classical film.

The comment Gilbert makes describing Endora as a town where nothing much ever happens and nothing much ever will, offers the cue to the audience, according to the principles of classical cinema, that something big could be going to happen in this sleepy little town (because no classical Hollywood film is ever about nothing in particular). However, the expectations of the audience are cheated. Gilbert's understated comment about Endora is actually a literal cue to the audience to describe the entire film. This is, in effect, 'the dominant' - the oblique way the film addresses the classical narrative.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape? is therefore a useful film with which to begin film analysis, because its form and style are atypical of the mainstream popular films that permeate the cinema today, and which of course, transgresses some of the expectations (and schemata) that a spectator may have when watching a classical film. The film is thus useful for foregrounding the way cinema is constructed through the norm of the classical cinema, and for defamiliarizing the audience to the almost hypnotic appeal of the conventions of mainstream cinema.

This analysis then, will show how *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* draws upon Hollywood narrative conventions but also violates some of the expectations that an audience has when watching a Hollywood film. It will look at how it deviates formally from the principles of a traditionally classical mainstream film, and how these formal differences affect audience response to the film, in regards to their schemata, and expectations. However, because of the enormity of a complete formal analysis of every filmic element within the film, this analysis will concentrate on the film's lack of narrative causality, its episodic nature, the lack of foregrounded goal-oriented characters, and thus a goal oriented narrative, its motivation and the ending.

5.2.2 **Narrative Pattern**

5.2.2.1 Causality and Progress in the Narrative

As already mentioned, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is a film where nothing much ever seems to happen, and there seems to be a lack of direct progress and causality within the narrative. The narrative pattern is like the physical landscape of Endora -flat and unassuming. Unlike the familiar pattern of classical cinema where the narrative

progressively climbs toward a culmination of the main narrative strands, the narrative of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* tends more to ripple over the flat landscape of Endora, collecting pieces of the town and its inhabitants' lives as it goes, concluding with a reflection of the beginning of the film, rather than the customary sensational climax and closure. The film thus appears to be rather episodic in nature and to have gaps in the narrative sequence. Instead of the uninterrupted and continuous flow of the classical narrative, the scenes in this film, appear, on the surface, not to be linked by much at all.

Generally, in mainstream cinema, an event at the end of one scene is seen as a cause leading to an effect, that is, the event that begins the next scene. For example, at the end of a scene one character may suggest they go and look at a building and in the next scene we see the characters looking at a house. However, in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, this does not happen. Many of the scenes appear not to be causally linked - at least not directly.

Nonetheless, one of the major principles of the neoformalist approach is that a film should be studied in and for itself, which means studying it as a whole and not as smaller, separate parts. Therefore, if one looks at how the smaller parts work together to make up the whole of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, it can be seen that indirectly they are all linked by the dominant narrational element of the theme, and that the episodic nature of the film is merely an appearance motivated by the theme.

Theme as cause and effect

The theme of the film helps to structure the narrative form of the film by the way it directs the plot and story. In general, the theme of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* centres on the frustrations of Gilbert living with a dysfunctional family and community, and the enormity of his responsibilities. This is shown in the narrative by the way the escalating incidents appear not to be connected, thus frustrating the audience, and helping them to identify with the frustrations in the many areas of Gilbert's life.

Thus, even though many of the scenes in the film are visually separated by direct cuts (which are motivated by the theme of the film) the film still maintains a coherent story. This is because when the film is looked at as a whole, the scenes are all still linked

together by the theme music, by aural bridging, and of course by the characters of the story, namely Gilbert, who is in every scene. For instance, if one was to look at the beginning of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* the direct cuts can be seen as the characters and settings are being introduced. For example, the film starts with a scene featuring Arnie and Gilbert. It then cuts to Endora, cuts to Gilbert's house and family, to the grocery store where he works, to Arnie up the water tower, and so on. Nevertheless, this sequence of scenes still maintains unity, as they are linked together by a voice-over narration by Gilbert, and by the theme of the film, as mentioned above. The direct cuts in the film, also serve a very practical purpose, in the sense that the end of each day, is marked by a fade-to-black, and the introduction of a new scene.

Characters and Causality

In most classical films, groups of characters interact to create causes and motivations. Their actions added together, steadily push the action forward. In *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* however, although the characters interact with one another on a day-to-day basis, their actions do not appear to have a distinct cause and effect relationship with other characters in the film.

Again, however, this must be looked at within the context of the film as a whole. Remembering that nothing is ever in a film by chance, and that every tiny element is constructed for a purpose, the analyst can then study what motivates the inclusion of a particular character, and how this character relates causally to the narrative.

A good example to begin with in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is the character of Bobby. On the surface, Bobby can be seen merely as one of Gilbert's friends, and a resident of Endora. However, after watching the film two or three times, one notices that Bobby in fact functions as a cue for some of the more melodramatic scenes in the film, and in terms of one of the major themes of the film - death. The fact that Bobby is an undertaker who drives a hearse, is not motivated purely by chance, it is, as mentioned, to cue some of the more melodramatic and suspenseful scenes in the film, especially related to death. For instance, the scene where Arnie climbs up the water tower for the first time. As the camera moves from Arnie at the top of the water tower, to the anxious crowd below, it moves to a shot of a hearse arriving. This immediately sets the mood that something

ominous is going to happen, such as the death of Arnie. However, in keeping with the tone of the film, Bobby is merely a teasing cue for an incident that doesn't end up happening, a function he undertakes right throughout the film.

Ken Carver is another character whose function is to create suspense in the storyline and cue some of the more dramatically intense moments in the film, such as his feared knowing of the affair between Gilbert and his wife. However, Ken Carver also functions to help the audience identify with Gilbert and to integrate the theme of the frustrations of responsibility and hardships living in a small town. This is particularly evident in the scene where he, at the end of his wits, throws his kids into the paddling pool he has bought them and screams "I'm doing the best I can here, I can't do any better". This reflects the thoughts that Gilbert is having about his own life, as he watches Mr Carver from his truck.

Most, if not all, of the characters within *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* reflect on Gilbert, and the central theme, in some way. Even though they seem disjointed and separated, other than in their daily lives, as a whole, the people of the Grape family and the town of Endora, all play their part in creating the character and story of Gilbert.

There are, for example, five or six scenes where Gilbert visits Becky's camp that seem to be, at first, unrelated to other scenes in the film. However, after a more detailed analysis, it can be seen that the sequence of scenes exist to provide insight into the character of Gilbert, the realisation of his dreams, and the problems he faces in his life. Gilbert's dilemmas are in turn, addressed and ultimately solved by Becky, who functions as a signifier for everything that Gilbert wants, and wants to be. For example, in the second scene, Gilbert's frustration with 'being stuck' in Endora is addressed by Becky's Grandma, who discusses their travelling plans and where they have already been. Gilbert suggests to Becky's Grandma that 'it must be incredibly frustrating to be stuck here in this place - in Endora'. However, Becky replies 'this place is as good a place as any'. This scene also indirectly addresses Gilbert's hang-up with small-town Endora, and his Momma's obesity, when the issue of external beauty is discussed. Becky is not into the whole external beauty thing 'because it doesn't last'. 'It's what you *do* that really matters'.

The fourth scene at Becky's camp provides the audience with further insight into the character of Gilbert, when Becky tells Gilbert to 'tell me what you want as fast as it comes to you'. Gilbert stumbles for a second and then replies 'I want a new thing - a house, a new house for the family. I want Momma to take aerobics classes. I want Ellen to grow up. I want a new brain for Arnie'. When urged by Becky to tell her what he wants just for him, Gilbert thinks for a moment and simply replies 'I want to be a good person'. Each of these wishes is addressed later in the film, and his frustrations with his life are ultimately resolved with the help of Becky, in his last visit to her camp.

In the last visit to Becky's camp Gilbert arrives after his effort to leave town in thwarted by the fact that he has nowhere to go. After Becky spots him lurking in the trees, he finally open up and realises, through the prompting of Becky, that the root of his dilemma's stems from his father's suicide and the fact that Gilbert was left to take care of the family. Gilbert is then able to realise that he is not the cause of his family's problems and is not a bad person after all.

> Gilbert (discussing his father): *'Nobody knew what he felt. He didn't give anything. He was just sort of there. You try to play with him, get him to play round, get him to laugh, get him to smile, get him to get mad, and nothing. Just like he was already dead'.*
>
> Becky: *'I used to know a guy like that'.*

The scenes at Becky's camp also work to advance the narrative. For instance, every time Gilbert goes to visit Becky, he creates some kind of problem in his life. For example, in one scene he is so engrossed in talking to Becky that he doesn't realise that Arnie has run off and climbed the water tower again. Because of his negligence, Arnie gets arrested this time, which in turn gets Momma to leave the house for the first time in many years, and thus indirectly helps Gilbert to address his feelings he has about her.

In summary then, it must be reiterated that it is impossible to analyse a film for its separate smaller parts, because they only take on meaning when looked at in relation to, and in the context of, the film as a whole.

5.2.2.2 Narrative Goals

As discussed in Chapter Three, another of the main principles of classical mainstream cinema, is a clearly defined narrative goal, and goal-oriented characters. Thus, storytelling is primarily undertaken through the actions of the characters and the obstacles they must overcome to achieve their goals.

On first appearance *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* seems not to have any clear narrative goals. There are moments within the film, when the narrative seems to come to a complete standstill, or to go around in circles, not really getting anywhere. However, this lack of clear cut goals has a particular function within the film, that is motivated again by the theme of the story. The main narrative strand, as discussed earlier, is Gilbert's escalating sense of frustration with his life, and his (undefined) goal is to overcome this by moving away from Endora.

Once again if the smaller parts of the film need to be related to the overall picture, it can be seen that by not clearly defining the goals of the narrative and the characters, the film is able to spend more time developing the individual characters, and the sense of the small town atmosphere of Endora. In most classical films, stereotyped or type-cast characters are used, so as to save time developing the characters, and enabling the story to push ahead. However, this film takes the more personal touch and spends an inordinate amount of time developing each character fully, so as to give the audience real insight into 'real' characters.

Goal-oriented characters

One of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*'s? most touching qualities is the way it strives to create characters that are as realistic as possible, with goals that are as realistic as possible. However, as already mentioned, this has often given the film the appearance of not having clearly defined goal-oriented characters. The reason for this, one could assume, is because the mundane everyday goals of the everyday characters in the film do not give rise to a storyline in which sensational obstacles and conflicts hinder the characters from achieving their goals. Where the film differs then, from a traditional mainstream feature film, is in the sense that the goals of the characters are 'real' and do not function within the film as a

means to a climactic and sensational closure, which in a sense goes against the aesthetic function of a film to be the opposite of everyday experience.

For example, Arnie's only real goal in the film is to climb to the top of the water tower, Momma's goal is to see Arnie make his 18th birthday, Tucker's goal is to work at the new Burger Barn that is coming to town, and Becky's Grandma's goal is to get the truck going again to get out of town. The only person not to reach their goal is Gilbert. His goal was to get out of Endora and away from the responsibility of looking after Arnie and his family. Although this doesn't happen, his goal is addressed throughout the narrative, and many of the obstacles that had been in his way have been removed. He simply chooses to stay.

Thus it can be seen that there are in fact clear narrative and character goals in the film, and these goals are all somewhat resolved or at least attended to at the end of the film. The difference from a classical film is that these goals are shown more as normal everyday goals rather than the means to a sensational closure within the film.

5.2.2.3 Motivation

Motivation, as discussed in previous chapters, is the process by which a narrative justifies its story material and the way the plot presents the material, which, in classical cinema, is done through compositional motivation, to secure a basic coherence.

However, as has been seen in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, instead of the typical film world of excitement, suspense, and high drama, this film focuses on everyday occurrences such as family problems, boring jobs, and unsatisfactory personal relationships, that don't seem to function purely for the progression of the narrative. Therefore it could be said that, in regards to the theme of the film and the way the narrative is put together in a seemingly simple way, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is realistically motivated, sometimes more so than compositionally motivated.

It is the realism of this film which helps to automatise it, because everyday reality is part of what art defamiliarizes. Reality also forms part of the material of which the work is

constructed - though it is, of course, transformed by the traits of the medium into something quite different from what it was originally.

This film shows everyday life, carefully observed, and as the audience grow to know the people in the film, they are cued also in finding out something about themselves. The atmosphere of the town is intensely real. However, this realist feel about the film is one of the very reasons it seems to deviate from the norm. This is because Hollywood has usually been equated with fantasy and escapism, and realism in a film has often been perceived as a departure from the norm of popular, classical, familiar cinema.

5.2.2.4 Ending/Resolution

Through the realistic motivation of the film, the ending of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* deviates somewhat from the traditional classical film in that it does not appear to reach a significant climax, or a complete closure, and the ending is not a totally happy one as a mainstream classical film usually is. However, the film does still adhere to classical narration in the sense that the ending lets the audience see the events and the characters in a new light. While Gilbert's goal of leaving Endora is the only goal that appears to be unresolved, the resolution of the film allows the audience insight into the character of Gilbert, so although he has not been able to leave town, many of the conflicts that have been bothering him have either been eliminated or partially resolved.

The ambiguous or unhappy ending, such as in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, is generally treated as more realistic than the ubiquitous happy ending of the Hollywood-style film, and thus is a very apt way to finish such a film. But again, it must be pointed out that this is merely a convention, since in everyday life one must assume that events can turn out either well or ill for the parties involved. Thus, many of the traits that have come conventionally to represent realism over the course of film history, have done so primarily because they were departures from the prevailing classical norms.[6]

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6 See Kristin Thompson's chapter A Formal Look at Realism in *Breaking the Glass Armor* for a more in depth look at realism.

5.2.3 Audience expectations

McFarlane and Mayer[7] suggest that the narrational pattern of classical cinema, 'encourages the successive formation of hypotheses that are essentially based on audience expectations that have been formed, or learned through the repetitive narrative conventions central to these expectations in the role of climax, the emotional and/or pivotal moments within the narrative structure that occur just prior to the resolution.' Therefore one way a film's form can affect the experience of the audience is by the way it creates a special sort of involvement on the part of the spectator. Thus the work's formal structures can only work through interaction with the mental operations of the audience.

Although *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* deviates from some traditional principles of the cinema, it does however, still adhere to aspects of classical narration, and thus to certain aspects of the audience's expectations, if only in small doses. For instance, it still sets up scenes that offer the audience narrative cues in which to hypothesise about what will happen next. An example of this occurs at the very beginning of the film where curiosity is aroused when the trailer homes come over the hill and Gilbert makes the comment that they have the right idea only passing through. Immediately a cue is offered to the audience to hypothesise about why Gilbert would say something like this. Is it because there is some morose, scary, threatening force or event lurking in the town or is Gilbert hiding some kind of secret? True to the classical tradition, the next scene partially answers these questions, but in a way that deviates from classical cinema and thus cheats the audience's expectations. Instead of being sensationally motivated by some big event to get the story going, Gilbert's comment is merely because he is bored and frustrated from living in the small rural town of Endora.

Everything in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is understated. It is a film that constantly tries to undermine or overthrow the expectations of the viewer. Incidents in the film that could have been used for sensationalising the storyline are played as very low key, and almost brushed off without comment, thus leaving the audience on the edge of their seats for the whole film, waiting for something to happen. This is prevalent when Arnie keeps climbing up the water tower. These scenes could have been prime opportunities for the

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7 See McFarlane and Mayer, *New Australian Cinema*, 1992. p.15.

film to create a climactic tragedy in the death of Arnie, or to help Gilbert out of his reverie by having him save Arnie. But instead, the events are simply shown as part of everyday life in Endora, adding to nothing more than Gilbert's frustrations (which are incidentally the whole point of the film).

The scene of Ken Carver's death is another scene in the film that is understated, and could have been exploited for suspense within the film, but was instead shown as another not-so-out-of-the-ordinary event in the town of Endora. Gilbert's affair with Betty Carver could also have been used for sensationalising or dramatising the narrative, and there are times throughout the story when the viewer may think something big is going to happen, especially the scenes where Ken Carver keeps hassling Gilbert about coming to talk to him. However, like the rest of the film, these scenes merely flow on to the next ones without much comment at all, and create an anti-climax for the audience.

There is however, a reason why the film chooses to do this with the audience expectations, which also helps to explain the film's emotional appeal. Even though the film does not adhere to traditional expectations of a Hollywood film, the audience is manipulated by this into identifying with Gilbert through the frustrations of the narrative, thus experiencing the film emotionally as Gilbert experiences his life.

The way that scenes are juxtaposed is formally different to classical film and is done so in a way that doesn't really make a formal comment, but are left to the audience to make their own connection and identification with by using their own experience. For example, the scene where Ken Carvers funeral is interrupted by the arrival of the new Burger Barn. The sequence of events leading up to this - Arnie running around the cemetery, the coy looks between the characters and so on, provide the audience with a situation that can be seen as rather humorous or in quite bad taste, depending on the personal experiences with which the viewers use to make sense of the scene.

5.2.3.1 Casting and audience expectation

Johnny Depp is an excellent choice of actor for the part of Gilbert Grape, as he has specialised in playing outsiders (*Edward Scissorhands*, *Benny and Joon*), and thus he is just what the audience expects in this role. If, however, someone such as Tom Hanks had

played this role, the film would, one assumes, have taken on a more classical, popular role, and would have caused a change in casting throughout the whole film. Most of the characters cast in the film, were virtually unknown, and thus fit the part perfectly for this little unknown and backward town of Endora. The actors that were better known such as Juliette Lewis (*Natural Born Killers, Cape Fear*) who played Becky and Mary Steenburgen, who played Betty Carver, were also actors that usually played the parts of outsiders or minor parts in other films, so they did not cheat audience expectations. Their roles within the film were also apt, because they did not really fit into the town of Endora, so the fact that they were better known actors actually helped in telling the story.

5.3 SUMMARY

The beauty of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, and one of the main reasons it appears to deviate so much from classical film, is the way the film uses attention to detail to explain the whole. It is the way the film sketches and selects detailed events and juxtaposes them to create the whole, that makes this film unique. Thus on first appearances, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* looks to be a non-classical film, that cheats audience expectations and deviates from the principles that pertain to commercial Hollywood success. However, by examining the film closer and discussing the function and motivation of devices, it is possible to see how the film is constructed to produce this particular response from the audience. Every formal device and element within the film has a particular function, and if formal changes were made, not only would the style or narration change, but the meaning of the film would be affected also, because it is the formal elements of the narration in this film, that help to tell the story, more than the story itself.

ONCE WERE WARRIORS

5.4 NOVEL TO FILM: CLASSICAL POLARISATION AND INDIGNATION IN *ONCE WERE WARRIORS*

5.4.1 Introduction

Once Were Warriors is a film that is widely used in New Zealand secondary schools for teaching about social themes, and for teaching book-to-film adaptation within an English curriculum. It would be easy to take this film and teach about racism in New Zealand, or urban domestic violence, or the differences in Maori culture, but as is discussed in Chapter Two, film analysis should not purely be about interpreting the meaning of a film. It should be about studying a particular film in and for itself, and perceiving how all the separate components work together to make up the whole. Analysis should be about how to look beyond the levels of interpretation, to the basic levels of form that create the final picture.

Of course, like the previous analysis on *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, *Once Were Warriors* needs to be examined with some sort of purpose in view. One of the most obvious points of interest, that would fit well into a school curriculum, is a comparison between the novel, which is not polarised and lacks the sense of indignation and blame of the film, and the way the film is adapted to fit the mainstream expectations of a classical narrative. This analysis then, will centre on the significance of polarisation and indignation in classical narration (foregrounding the neoformalist principle of the dominant), and will demonstrate these principles by comparing the ambiguous presentation of an episode from the novel to the treatment in the film.

5.4.2 The Dominant

The dominant, according to Thompson[8], is one of the neoformalist critic's most important tools, because it is the formal principle that controls the work at every level,

8 Thompson, p.89.

foregrounding some devices and subordinating others. Although there can often be a number of controlling principles at different points within a film, one of the most noticeable dominants in *Once Were Warriors* is the use of the classical principles of polarisation and indignation, as seen in the pivotal scenes of Grace's rape and consequent suicide.

It is the classical narrative system and the polarised melodramatic structure that define, for most people, the commercial narrative feature film. As discussed in Chapter Three, moral polarisation and emotionally excessive form (melodrama) are key narrative features of classical mainstream cinema, and are part of what creates commercial appeal and ensures the commercial success of a film. This is, of course, different to the structure of a novel, which relies more on detailed description to appeal to the imagination of the reader.

5.4.3 Book to Film: Difference in Structure

The saying "a picture paints a thousand words" is an apt description when discussing the differences between the mediums of mainstream literature and film. While it may take a book ten pages to discuss a character's feelings, set the scene, and promote the action, the same thing can be done in only a few seconds in a film, using both stylistic and narrational devices.

Thus, when a film is adapted from a novel, many elements need to be discarded, and other more multi-faceted devices need to be added in their place. For example, in the novel *Once Were Warriors*, Grace frequently visits the Trambert's house (a wealthy white family that live over the back of the Heke house), wondering what it would be like to live the way they do. It is here that she commits suicide by hanging herself in a tree in their yard. While the inclusion of the Trambert house and family is extremely important and crucial to the development of Grace's character, and the storyline of the novel, the inclusion of the family in the novel also functions to create further ambiguity regarding the reasons why Grace killed herself, and the subsequent identity of her rapist. The film, on the other hand, does not go into the detail needed for including the family, so therefore changes the plot of the narrative. The film makes it quite clear who Grace's rapist is, and thus discards any reason to include the Trambert's and their home in the narrative. However, even though the plot has been changed, the story ultimately stays the same,

while also giving film audiences what they want - a fast moving, easily understood film that offers retribution and hope in the ending, thus adhering to mainstream audience expectations.[9]

Unlike Alan Duff's novel, which refuses to polarise the story into victims and villains, the film makes relatively clear on what its standpoint is regarding characters and issues within the narrative, and even offers a sense of hope that is not found in the novel. The prime example here, of course, is the way the film clearly divulges who Grace's rapist is, through both dialogue ("*Uncle Bully's going to be gently with you*") and visuals, and thus enables punishment of the crime to take place. The novel, on the other hand, ambiguously lays the blame on Jake, therefore forfeiting the chance of retribution.

> Grace: *I think I'm being, uh, molested...I can figure out what's happening, but I can't work out why. I'm confused and yet I'm not. I'm scared and yet I'm scared for him too, this person doing this. This man. (What if it's my father? What if it's not and my father comes in? What if he thinks its me doing it too?)* [10]

> Jake: *...it can' be true. I'm not like that. But then again...you know how drunk a man gets, he don't remember nuthin half the fuckin time. But surely he wouldn't do that? Man don't even have thoughts like that, of, you know: havin sex with kids. Let alone his own daughter. But then again....* [11]

The film also goes beyond this, however and offers identification for many viewers, through the different issues and themes it considers, such as the different sides of the Maori culture and urban existence, domestic violence, poverty, and alcoholism, among others.

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9 It must be noted here that while the story does not change much, the difference in thematic emphasis of the film does cause some ideological changes, such as the comparative differences in the portrayal of Nig's gang. Because the film strived to be more emotional and more hopeful in its outcome, the Toa gang is glamorized and presented very positively, whereas Duff had seen them very negatively (and much closer to general public perceptions of gangs in New Zealand).

10 Alan Duff. *Once Were Warriors.* Auckland, Tandem Press. 1990. P.90.

11 Ibid., p.163.

Indignation is also an aspect of the classical film narrative, and *Once Were Warriors* specifically utilises this emotion as an integral part of its aesthetic process. This is seen predominantly in the scene where Grace is raped. However, where the book discusses the rape scene with great ambiguity, and the reader is unsure as to who the rapist is (even Jake is not sure if he actually raped her), the film uses the dramatic premise of the violation of innocence - to create the basic emotion of indignation by making it clear as to who is to blame, and by cueing the viewer to identify with Grace. For example, when Grace is raped the camera lingers on her face. Although this is not necessary in terms of the narrative, the use of this close up camera technique cues a certain emotion in the audience. The viewer may feel sickened by what they see, because the camera is positioned in order to make the viewer feel as if they are personally being violated. This is because the constant use of close-up camera angles requires the audience to build up a personal relationship with each character, which, in effect, helps build up emotion for the climax of the film. The close-up, and over the shoulder shots of Bully also help to create indignation in the audience, as does the dialogue of the scene where Bully tries to lay the blame on Grace by saying: *"Your Mum and Dad are going to be real angry at you, turning me on like that. Coming down stairs in nothing by that flimsy little nightie".*

Not only does this scene polarise the drama, it is also a crucial stepping stone to a classical Hollywood ending. Thus the most intense sense of indignation peaks at the very end of the film when Beth finds out that Grace killed herself because Bully raped her. However, in accordance with mainstream tradition, a sense of relief is offered to the audience, when Jake nearly kills Bully in the pub after Beth shows him Grace's journal.

5.4.3.1 The Ending

It is useful for analysis and for defamiliarizing the notion of the classical ending to look at the differences between the ending and resolution of the novel and the film. Classical cinema is usually characterised by its strong causality and by a strident, polarised structure that builds to the emotionally powerful climax. The film *Once Were Warriors* builds up to this climax through the violation of Grace, her death and the funeral, whereas the novel builds up to the climax through ambiguous means. For example, in the novel the reason for Grace's death, and thus the identity of Grace's rapist is never really discovered.

According to Brian McDonnell[12], Alan Duff's novel had some technical difficulties with its ending, as it did not build up to any unitary solution, and almost petered out as if the story had run out of steam. McDonnell also suggests that while it was alluded to in the novel, there was certainly no dramatisation of Beth's resolve to do something positive. Of course, makers of the film knew that any movie version needed to be much more sensational and more dramatic, thus they changed the ending to offer more hope. Even though the ending is rather ambiguous, the film still offers hope through the character of Beth, and ultimately the 'correct standards of life', according to mainstream tradition, are reaffirmed. This of course is needed in classical film if the film is to be commercially successful, which of course *Once Were Warriors* was.

What is also needed for a commercially successful film, is retribution of the villain's crime, which in the case of *Once Were Warriors*, is the beating of Uncle Bully for the raping of Grace. However, this retribution occurs only after what could have been regarded as a 'happy' ending to the film, as what is left of Beth's family (including the new member of Toot) is shown sitting around the dinner table as a 'happy' family. Thus, even the retribution takes on a rather uncertain tone because, in effect, it disturbs the peacefulness of the reacquainted family, and once again places Jake as a problematic who has the potential to stand in the way of complete happiness, especially since he has the last word.

However, the notion of the active spectator needs to be reiterated here, since while one analyst may see the ending of the film as rather negative and threatening, a spectator bringing a different background and experiences to the film, may see the ending as totally positive. The main point is that the ambiguity in the ending does not totally conform to classical Hollywood standards, but departs from this tradition with a particular function in mind. Thus the question could be posed: why was the film still so successful even though the ending may not totally conform to the viewers' expectations?

The answer to this question could be found by returning to the classical principles of polarisation and indignation. It could be said that *Once Were Warriors* knowingly

12 See Brian McDonnell, Once Were Warriors: Film, Novel, Ideology. In *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies.* Volume 1, Number 2, 1994.

capitalises on these basic melodramatic systems, and other aspects of the classical narrative system, to intentionally close the film at the point of extreme emotional strain, a strain generated by the film's binary narrative structure of innocence and goodness versus wickedness. Thus the closing of the film does not signal the end of the story, and the resolution of the 'problem', but functions as an indication to the audience that its concerns, the perpetuation of domestic violence through basic social institutions, extends beyond just the fictional text of the film itself, to contemporary society. By using themes of a darker disposition and by uncovering disorder within New Zealand society and culture, the film takes on a more realistic nature, rather than one of simply melodrama.

5.5 SUMMARY

Discussing the differences between a book-to-film adaptation is a suitable way of teaching the notion of defamiliarization. It not only brings the more obvious features to the attention of the viewer, but it also foregrounds the differences between the mediums, and helps the viewer to become more aware of the filmic elements that are often taken for granted in everyday film watching, and analysis.

It is important to make the point that the neoformalist approach is a consistently flexible and adaptable approach that offers a series of assumptions and analytical tools which are broad enough to accommodate any film, and broad enough that it can be used as an umbrella approach for examining films in a variety of ways.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

It is quite evident that mathematics, the natural sciences of man, and history are significant areas of knowledge and that language also is both an object and instrument of reason. But what about the arts? Do they belong within the province of knowledge? Is aesthetic experience in any meaningful way cognitive? Is the study of arts of any value in developing the powers of human intelligence? - Philip H. Phenix.[1]

Central to the concept of education is the development of knowledge - R.S. Peters.[2]

Undeniably the arts have perennially performed worthy functions in the lives of individuals. Thus this thesis shows how with the recent introduction of multiplex cinema houses, and with the increase in cinema going, it is no longer viable to simply regard films as mindless entertainment. Films have become such a prevalent yet taken-for-granted part of many people's everyday lives, that it is difficult to ignore their importance as a significant part of popular culture. Given the cultural significance of film it is a justifiable object of academic investigation and intellectual analysis.

This thesis also discusses how in the past, the study of film has often been limited to a few quick lessons within an English or Social Studies syllabus. But, with the introduction of a new Arts programme within the New Zealand secondary school curriculum, the teaching of film is an area which is in need of more focus and thought.

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1 Philip H. Phenix. *Philosophy of Education.* Henry Hold and Co. New York. 1958. p.424.
2 R. S. Peters (ed.) *The Philosophy of Education.* Oxford University Press, London. 1975. p.5.

6.1 NEOFORMALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

Films are often chosen in secondary teaching for their very important social or political themes - AIDS, The Holocaust, Racism and so on - but this thesis points out that this approach concentrates on themes and issues rather than on the film itself. This is not to say, however, that this is not an important part of studying film. But it does foreground how the neoformalist approach, on the other hand, offers skills for understanding both the film itself and the wider issues related to it.

It must be emphasised however, that the neoformalist analysis is a very general one, and is by no means the only approach. Many other approaches to film study, such as Generic, Ideological and Thematic analysis are used successfully and beneficially. But, as this thesis points out, the analytical approach of Neoformalism has one distinct advantage: it is teachable, and allows other aspects, such as those mentioned above, to also be introduced. Because Neoformalism is so flexible and variable, taking into account aspects such as viewer's personal backgrounds and how a film exists within an historical period, or how expected generic traditions affect viewer response, it can, in effect be used as an 'umbrella' approach, in which all other approaches can be discussed, or at least referred to.

It also must be pointed out that the examples given within the text of this thesis are merely concrete examples, to demonstrate that it is easier to teach with examples. The fact that this thesis only uses classical mainstream films for demonstration, is purely for reasons of convenience. It is easier to begin teaching film studies with films that students are not only familiar and comfortable with, but are also readily available.

Secondary school students have no context or language to articulate their reaction to film. However, as this thesis suggests, the analytical approach of Neoformalism can be structured to suit the classroom situation, whereas other approaches that are more emotional and intuitive are highly subjective and thus vary greatly from one individual to another. They are therefore difficult to share in the classroom.

6.1.1 Implications for teaching

What this thesis is effectively trying to demonstrate is to teach particular filmic concepts. This is often hard because it is now not fact based - something that many parents might prefer. Often parents are not concerned as long as their children are learning something concrete and factual. Thus it is important to establish a firm basis from which the why and how film of can be studied.

From a Neoformalist view, this can be seen in the way film form can be analysed just as definitively and precisely as the form of any other field of study, including fact-based fields such as mathematics. The discipline of artistic achievement can, in fact, be extremely exacting.

While concepts are often hard to teach, what this thesis maintains, is that concepts of film analysis need to be taught in a very literal way - by demonstration. This however, brings one to the practical problems of teaching film analysis.

6.1.1.1 Practical Teaching Problems

How a teacher delivers this material to secondary school students is one of the first problems that needs to be addressed. As the Neoformalist approach suggests, individual viewers see films in very different ways, and no package of discrete concepts or interpretations can encompass all those ways of experiencing a film. Therefore, the teacher should avoid reducing a film experience to a few neat lessons. Lessons have to be in-depth, but also have to be practical enough to be taught in 50 minute period slots.

Repetition also needs to be built into film teaching to recap and reconfirm ideas, or if students have missed a particular piece. Also students quite often choose the subject of film studies as a 'soft' option because watching films seems like fun. So the course needs to be able to accommodate differing levels of academic ability.

The whole point of teaching film analysis is not for the teacher to be an arbiter of taste, or to didactically teach issues and themes within films. It is rather, as the neoformalist approach points out - to call attention to a film's form and to offer the student a wide range

of analytical tools that can be used flexibly to suit their particular approach to the specific film at hand.

6.1.1.2 Practical Classroom Problems

There are also practical classroom problems that need to be taken into account. Firstly there has to be the appropriate, and preferably high quality projection equipment in the school. There is no use teaching a film with equipment that is not going to do justice to the films being watched.

Appropriate viewing conditions are also important, so the school preferably needs a room that is able to be blacked out, and that is away from other classrooms for the reasons regarding sound.

6.2 SUMMARY

This thesis, although attempting to provide a framework to bridge the gap between those texts that do not have enough theory and those that have too much, does not profess to cover every relevant concept or production process within the vast area of film study.

For the educator concerned with the teaching of film in New Zealand secondary schools, Neoformalism simply provides a flexible framework, and basis of study, that develops skills for analysis of form, from which ideological issues and so on, can then be isolated.

This thesis then, is an attempt to describe a framework, which is designed to introduce particular concepts and provide a base for different ways of thinking about film. What is needed now, is a comprehensive, but adaptable text that encompasses both theory (that is user-friendly and easily applicable), and a functional framework from which to start.

Finally, some caution needs to be exercised in considering the implications and recommendations for teaching which have been suggested in this work. At best, they are merely tentative hypotheses which would seem to follow from a critical analysis of educational film texts that are available to New Zealand secondary schools.

The main point is that both students, teachers and cinema goers in general, need to be made aware of the obvious complexities of film that are otherwise taken for granted and which a neoformalist approach can help to make clearer.

Glossary

Aesthetics — The opposite of real, everyday experience. Kristin Thompson[1] suggests that films and other artworks, plunge the viewer into a non-practical, playful type of interaction. They renew the audience's perceptions and other mental processes because they hold no immediate practical implication for them. For example, if a viewer sees the hero or heroine in danger on screen, they do not leap forward read to act as a rescue - rather they enter the film-watching process as an experience completely separate from their everyday existence.

Angle — The camera's angle of view relative to the subject being photographed. A high-angle shot is photographed from above, a low-angle from below the subject.

Approach — A set of assumptions about different characteristics shared by artworks, about the strategies viewers go through in understanding all artworks and about ways in which artworks relate to society.

Artistic Motivation — A rather difficult motivation to define. In one sense, every device in an artwork has an artistic motivation, since it functions in part to contribute to the creation of the work's abstract, overall shape - its form. In another sense, artistic motivation is present in a really noticeable and significant way only when the other three types of motivation are withheld. A special, 'strong' case of artistic motivation comes with the **baring of the device** - where the formal function of the given device or structure in the work is foregrounded. In a classical or realist work that draws heavily upon the other three types of motivation, the device will be bared only occasionally.

Aural bridging — An editing technique where sound is used to join two shots or scenes together that have been separated by a direct cut.

Auteur Theory — A theory that say there is a person primarily responsible for the entire style and treatment of the content of a film. Generally used

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1 Kristin Thompson, p.8.

in reference to a director with a recognisable style and thematic preoccupation.

Automatization The opposite of defamiliarization, automatization occurs when the audience no longer need to put any effort into 'reading' art, and the aesthetic and non aesthetic realms become blurred subconsciously in the minds of the spectator. At its simplest, it is when the linking together of film's formal components are automatic and familiar.

Backgrounds Norms of prior experience. There are three basic types of background: the everyday world, other artworks and the practical purposes of film (advertising, reportage, propaganda and so on).

Bound Motifs The digressions or 'landings of the staircase' are there to delay the ending, and they are likely to be tangential actions that could be altered or eliminated or replaced without changing the basic causal line.

Classical Cinema A general, but convenient term used to describe the style of mainstream fiction films produced in Hollywood from about the mid-teens until the late 1960's, and that continues to define the style of most feature films today. A classical film is one strong in story, with a functional visual style that rarely distracts from the characters in action. It is structured narratively, with a clearly defined conflict, complications that intensify to a rising climax, and a resolution that emphasised formal closure.

Compositional Motivation Explains and justifies the presence of an element (device) in terms of its necessity for story comprehension - the construction of narrative causality, space or time. Most frequently, compositional motivation involves the 'planting' of information early on which we will need to know later.

Connotation Connotative meanings move us to a level where we must interpret to understand. Connotations may be implicit meanings cued by the work. Viewers tend to look for referential and explicit meanings first, and, when they cannot account for a meaning in this straight forward way, they then move to the level of interpretation. One also uses interpretation to create meanings that go beyond the level of the individual work, and that help define its relation to the world.

Conscious Responses The viewing activities that the spectator is aware of. Many cognitive skills involved in viewing are conscious: a viewer

struggle to understand a story, to interpret certain meanings, to explain to ourselves why a strange camera movement is present, and so on. This is generally the most important of the procedural responses for the neoformalist critic.

Constructed No matter how real a film seems (even a documentary), they are constructed - by editing, camera shots, dialogue and so on.

Defamiliarization Is the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in individual's lives. Film defamiliarizes reality by the way the non-practical perception of the audience allows them to see everything in the artwork differently form the way they world see it in reality, because it seems strange in it new context.
The technique of art, and thus film, is to make objects unfamiliar, thus it can be assumed that all *art* at least defamiliarizes ordinary reality. Even in a conventional work (documentary) the events are ordered and purposeful in a way that differs from reality.

Delay One of the narrative film's most important sets of devices is that group which functions to hold off an ending until a point appropriate to the overall design. Nearly every film is likely to have some delaying structures.
The overall pattern of such delays is called *Stairstep Construction.*

Denotation Can involve **referential** meaning, in which the spectator simply recognises the identity of those aspects of the real world that the work includes. Since these types of meaning are laid out in the film we comprehend them or not, according to our prior experience of artworks and the world.
Denotative meanings are **explicit** meanings.

Device Any single element or structure that plays a role in the art work - a camera movement; a frame story, a repeated word, costume, a theme, and so on. Devices can be analysed using the concepts of **function** and **motivation**.

Dominant The area of the film image that compels the viewer's most immediate attention, usually because of a prominent visual contrast.

Editing The joining of one shot (strip of film) with another.

Explicit Meaning The outright stating of more abstract ideas so they are easily interpreted by the audience.

Flashback An editing technique that suggests the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the past.

Focus The degree of acceptable sharpness in a film image. 'Out of focus' means the images are blurred and lack acceptable linear definition.

Form The general system of relationships among the parts of a film.

Formalism Russian Literary approach based on many assumptions about the general nature of art.

Function Is the purpose served by the presence of any given device. It is crucial to understanding the unique qualities of a given artwork, for while many works may use the same device, the function of the device may be different in each work.
The function of the device in context is usually more important for the analyst than is the device as such.

Genre A system of codes, conventions and visual styles which enable an audience to determine the kind of narrative they are viewing. The function of genre is to make films comprehensible and familiar to viewers, by enabling them to place a particular film within the context of other similar films. Accordingly, genres have long been used by the film industry to organise the production and marketing of films, and by film critics and audiences to regulate their viewing.

Hermeneutic Line Consists of the set of enigmas the narrative poses by withholding information.

Ideology A body of doctrine, myth and symbols of social movement which has some reference to some political and cultural plan. A body of ideas, together with the devices for putting them into operation.

Implicit Meaning Also referred to as connotative meanings, move the audience to a level where they must interpret to understand. The meaning of a particular device is not at once recognised.

Juxtaposition To place in close proximity or side by side. Unassociated or unlike images may be juxtaposed to create a striking effect.

Method A set of procedures employed in the actual analytical process.

Montage Transitional sequences of rapidly edited images, used to suggest the lapse of time or the passing of events.

Motivation It is a cue given by the work that prompts the audience to decide what could justify the inclusion of the device. The reason the work suggests for the presence of any given device is its motivation.
There are four basic types of motivation: **Compositional, realistic, transtextual** and **artistic.**

Narration The process whereby the plot presents and withholds story information in a certain order. Narration continually cues the viewer's hypothesis-forming about story events throughout the course of viewing the film.

Physiological Responses Processes that involve automatic responses that the viewers do not control, such as perceiving movement across a succession of static film images, differentiating colours, or hearing a series so sound waves as sounds.

Polarisation The defining of character traits, morals and other filmic elements into distinct categories of 'good' and 'bad'.

Preconscious Responses Easy and nearly automatic processing of information in ways that are so familiar that the viewer does not need to think about them. These processes are available to the viewer's conscious mind, and they can, if they think about it, realise how they went about recognising stylistic devices such as cutting, camera movement and so on. Viewers learn reactions to these devices so well that they usually no longer need to think about them, even after only a few visits to the cinema.

Proairetic Line The proairetic aspect of the narrative is the chain of causality that allows the viewer to understand how one action is linked logically to others.

Realistic Motivation Consists of the plausibility of a given device or function. It is a type of cue in the work leading the audience to appeal to notions from the real world to justify the presence of a device.

Realism A style of filmmaking that attempts to duplicate the look of objective reality as it is commonly perceived, with emphasis on authentic locations and details, and a minimum of distorting techniques.

Referential Meaning The viewer is able to recognise and identify the aspects of the real world that the work includes.

Roughened Form Encompasses all types of devices and relations among devices that would tend to make perception and understanding less easy. It can function to create an infinite variety of effects. One of the most common types of roughened form involves the creation of *delays*.

Scene An approximate unit of film, composed of a number of interrelated shots, brought together usually by a central concern - a location, an incident, or a minor dramatic climax.

Schemata Learned mental patterns which develop from cultural, social and historical experiences and, in terms of the film viewing situation, provides a basis for the spectator to constantly form a series of probable hypotheses - hypotheses about a character's actions, about the space off-screen, about the source of a sound, about every local and large-scale device that the viewer notices.

Semes A term coined by Roland Barthes meaning devices that characterise the figures in a narrative, or more simply - character traits. Since characters are not people, viewers do not necessarily judge them by the standards of everyday behaviour and psychology. Rather, as with all devices and collections of devices, characters must be analysed in terms of their functions in the work as a whole.

Shot Those images that are recorded continuously from the time the camera starts to the time it stops. An unedited strip of film.

Stairstep Construction This metaphorical term implies stretches of action in which the events progress toward the ending alternating with other stretches in which digressions and delays deflect the action form its direct path. The concept of stairstep construction implies that some materials are more crucial to the narrative progression than other. Those actions that move us toward the end are necessary to the overall narrative - termed as *bound motifs.*

Stereotype A standardised idea or concept. Often reinforced through repeated exposure in the media.

Story The cognitive process of rearranging the plot events, the causally linked material, into chronological order. This process is something learned from watching narrative films and from dealing with other narrative artworks as well.
For most films the story is able to be constructed without great difficulty.

Style The repeated and salient uses of film techniques characteristic of a single film or group of films. It is the formal system of a film that organises film technique.

Symptomatic Meaning When one speaks of a film's non-explicit ideology, or of the film as a reflection of social tendencies, or of the film as suggestive of the mental states of large groups of people, then one is interpreting its symptomatic meanings.

Plot Is the structured set of all causal events as the audience see and hear them presented in the film itself. Typically some events will be presented directly and others only mentioned; also, events often will be given to the viewer out of chronological order, as when flashbacks occur or when a character tells us of earlier events which we did not witness.

Transtextual Motivation Involves any appeal to conventions of other artworks, and hence it can be a varied as the historical circumstances allow. In effect, the work introduces a device that is not motivated adequately within its own terms, but that depends on our recognition of the device form past experience.

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