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Reflective Paper #4

Film, Movies, and Television: The All-Encompassing Dive into Aesthetics

No medium is quite as all-encompassing as the modern movie, film, or television show. From the art of writing to the mastery of the moving image, set design, costuming, and the use of intricate sound design and soundtracks, film incorporates multiple artistic disciplines. Due to its vast scope, film, movies, and television permeate nearly every aspect of aesthetics and art—from the casual intake of everyday aesthetics to the social and political realms, even spanning the spectrum between high and low art. Film offers a paradoxical and complex lens through which to examine all spheres of aesthetics.

In Chapter 1 of *The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics*, Tom Leddy explains that the field of everyday aesthetics “covers the domains of everyday life not covered by such previously existing fields as the aesthetics of art, the aesthetics of nature, and the aesthetics of mathematics” (Leddy). This places film in an intriguing position, as it can be regarded within all of these realms. For the purpose of exploring its relation to everyday aesthetics, I will step back from its analysis as an art form or its connections to mathematics. Instead, I will focus on its involvement in modern everyday life and the passive judgments that arise from film’s influence.

One example of film’s reach into everyday aesthetics is the movie soundtrack. Music—especially in the age of digital accessibility and constant public exposure—firmly exists within the realm of everyday aesthetic judgment. While music can be analyzed as high art, Leddy

acknowledges that “the relationship between everyday aesthetics and the aesthetics of art is a persistent problem,” ultimately concluding that the perception of art enhances our “contemporary everyday environments” (Leddy). Thus, we can consider the popularity of a song—whether through its creation or its inclusion in a film—as evidence of film’s influence on everyday aesthetics. *Billboard* magazine’s article “The Top 75 Movie Songs of All Time” features numerous songs that reached the Top 100 charts in part because of their association with a film (“The Top 75 Movie Songs”). Once a song attains that level of visibility, its presence in people’s everyday aesthetic judgments increases significantly. Therefore, movies play a crucial role in shaping how we experience everyday aesthetics.

Considering the cultural prevalence of movies through the lens of everyday life, Zirong Lu’s article “How Do Films Reflect Our Societies Today?” opens an important discussion about how movies mirror current society—and, by extension, how they influence social and political aesthetics. Lu argues that popular films offer insight into the state and trends of current culture (Lu). This aligns with Leddy’s assertion that the contributions of theatre, film, and television to social aesthetics are significant due to their depiction of social situations. Leddy writes, “Cinema tends to focus on personal situations with a visual range and intensity” (Leddy). By his definition, social aesthetics are shaped by the social situations people experience. Combined with Lu’s argument that on-screen events often reflect real-life experiences, this supports the notion that movies significantly influence the realm of social aesthetics.

This idea can be taken a step further by examining how films portray socio-political issues. Lu notes, “Movies can also be a catalyst for social and political change,” using *Milk* (dir. Gus Van Sant) as a case study of LGBTQ+ rights and awareness (Lu). Leddy’s statement, “The political equivalent of discovery lies in an openness to new ideas and to change that comes from

wide participation in social decision-making,” reinforces the notion that films serve as educational tools and motivators for political awareness and change (Leddy). However, not all cinematic impact is positive. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, had a deeply damaging cultural effect. As *History.com* reports, the film helped revive the violent activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States (Clark). Although the film is historically praised by some for its editing techniques, its horrific social consequences are often overlooked in academic discourse. While both Leddy and Lu discuss the transformative power of film within socio-political aesthetics, it is important not to ignore its capacity for harm. Media literacy, therefore, is an essential practice in cultivating the empathy and critical understanding necessary for engaging with social aesthetics.

Film also exemplifies the fluid boundary between high and low art, as its reception is heavily shaped by cultural norms and individual experience. Some films, in fact, appeal to both audiences. John A. Fisher notes in *High Art Versus Low Art* that “many of Hitchcock’s movies have a ‘bilateral’ capacity to appeal to both audiences” (Fisher 142). A personal favorite with similar dual appeal is Korean director Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2019). The film, which masterfully blends genres and tones, captivated both critics and general audiences. Bong’s genre-bending, socially conscious, and at times action-packed films bridge the gap between entertainment and artistic achievement.

Setting aside experimental films—more akin to installation pieces than widely accessible entertainment—the mainstream film industry is one of the most lucrative and well-funded in the world. Its global popularity attracts a vastly different audience than curated art exhibitions. As such, films fall within Noël Carroll’s theory of mass art, meeting the criteria of being “produced and distributed by a mass technology” and shaped by “the influence of popular taste” (Carroll,

qtd. in Fisher 139). A prime example is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), whose films are not only widely distributed but also similar in tone, themes, and character archetypes. While these movies are often dismissed by academics as pure entertainment, they nonetheless dominate popular media consumption.

On the other end of the spectrum is *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by Orson Welles. As a film student, I have watched this film at least three times in class. Often cited as one of the greatest films ever made, it was “twice ranked by the American Film Institute as the greatest American film ever made” (“*Citizen Kane* [1941]”). However, it holds only an 8.3/10 rating on IMDb (“*Citizen Kane* – IMDb”), while other films, such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), are rated even higher. This may be due to its perceived slow pacing and emphasis on theme and visual metaphor over straightforward entertainment, placing *Citizen Kane* more firmly in the high art category. Still, the film is not inaccessible; while trained viewers may appreciate it more deeply, it has a 99% score on Rotten Tomatoes (“*Citizen Kane* – Rotten Tomatoes”).

This brings us to another unique intersection in film: the increasingly trained and discerning general audience. Viewers today often seek more artistically ambitious films. The upcoming MCU film *Thunderbolts* demonstrates this trend, as a highly skilled and Oscar-nominated team is leading the project amid declining general enthusiasm for the franchise. On the opposite end, as Fisher writes, “Whether it is justified or not, entertainment and mass culture are being taken more and more seriously by artists and art theorists” (Fisher 138). Not only are audiences growing more open to high-art cinema, but critics, academics, and filmmakers are increasingly acknowledging the artistic potential of entertainment-driven film and television.

Overall, film is the ultimate medium for analyzing aesthetics and art. Its complex relationship with the art world and its simultaneous status as mass entertainment allow it to remain relevant across all aspects of aesthetic experience.

Works Cited

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