

Interview with James Monaco

Q: What's it like to return to *How To Read A Film* after more than thirty years?

A: Well, I've been living with it off and on for most of that time. It's been an albatross, in the best sense. The Second edition appeared in 1980. Sales continued to increase throughout the eighties and nineties (and I was busy with other projects) so I let it be. By the early nineties the book was certainly showing its age. My friend Bill Becker, who founded Janus films, suggested at lunch one day in 1991 that I should do a multimedia version. I said, "why didn't I think of that?!"

We started on it almost immediately, but the CD-ROM medium was changing so rapidly the multimedia version didn't appear until 2000, when DVD-ROM was far enough advanced to present decent movies. The Third print edition appeared the same year, and it was a vastly different book from its 1980 predecessor.

Q: What were the significant changes from 1980 to 2000?

A: Well, everything had changed — and nothing had changed. By 2000 the digital revolution was in full swing. CGI was revolutionizing the industry and art. But the types of films being made weren't much different from the seventies and early eighties. The same filmmakers, producers, and studio execs were still in command more than a quarter-century later: Lucas, Spielberg, Coppola, Scorsese, Reitman, Jeff Berg, Mike Medavoy, Bob Shaye, Peter Bart — all these seventies folks were still names to be reckoned with in the business and the art. Even Robert Altman made a comeback. There were new guys, like James Cameron, John Hughes, Tim Burton, but there hadn't been a stylistic revolt: the same forms and genres of the seventies still pertained.

Q: And how about the changes from 2000 to today?

A: It's very interesting: in both technology and art, business and social influence, film has changed more in the last decade than in the thirty years before.

With regard to technology, CGI has increased its power by a couple of magnitudes, such that entire movies now depend on it: call this the fantasy revolution: if you can imagine it, you can film it. As a business, feature film hasn't grown much. It is now superseded financially by other media from internet to ring-tones. Similarly, other media have a much greater influence on our culture than feature film does.

The "summer" films haven't changed much at all. The blockbuster CGI adventure films, almost all sequels, usually based on comics, continue to generate much of the revenue for the industry. It's like we're living in *Groundhog Day*: the very idea that we have to

“reboot” franchises (Batman, Startrek) suggests a profound paucity of invention. The aging franchise films have been joined, sorry to say, by the “gross-out” arrested-development adolescent comedies, most of which seem to star Seth Rogen.

The “winter” films—the ones made for adults (“Mature Audiences”?)—have however developed a neat postmodern sensibility. You can find a much more sophisticated attitude towards narrative now. I think Paul Haggis’s *CRASH* (2005) is the model here. But Charlie Kaufman’s experiments are also interesting (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*).

However, the most important development in the last ten years has been in nonfiction film. The essay film and the so-called “documentary” have provided the most interesting developments in the art — and technology — of movies during the oughts. On the one hand, we have essays like Michael Moore’s films and Al Gore’s and Davis Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. Think about it: has anyone previously won a Nobel Prize for a movie? And Moore, whatever you think of his politics, seems to me to be the most inventive and creative filmmaker of the new century simply because of his personal — egotistical — approach.

On the other hand, we have the explosion in nature films (symbolized by *March of the Penguins*). The successes here are due in large part to digital cinema. Digital cameras give documentarists a large measure of new freedom because of their ability to shoot in low light, and the miniaturization they permit. For me, this is the most exciting development in film in the last decade—not the fantasies CGI permits. (See Jacques Perrin’s *Winged Migration* and Rob MacIntyre’s *Raptor Force*, for example.)

You can see the effects of these developments in the tsunami of micro-movies that now flood the internet. YouTube and its rivals have completely revolutionized the way film art is distributed.

Q: What new sections in the book are you most proud of?

A: Almost 25 percent of the book is new material. (We excised a lot of out-of-date stuff.)

I like the way the section on “TV and the Family” has developed over the years. I think we did a good job on surveying the development of film and TV in the oughts (postmodernism and the essay film; “reality” TV and Jerry Bruckheimer’s extreme stylization). The discussion of metafiction is useful, I think.

We did a good job describing how digitization has changed the filmmaking process, while at the same time preserving an analysis of the analog process which is the model for all things digital. I think we provide a good survey of all the negatives involved in digitization—and there are many.

We also provide an introduction to internet film — a phenomenon that grows in importance every day.

But the most important addition to the Fourth edition is the section on the Mediasphere.

By far the most significant change since the twentieth century has been our radical transition from what I have termed the “Sociosphere” to the “Mediasphere.” We are now defined by our screens — from two-inch cellphone screens to the forty-two-inch TVs to the slightly larger cineplex screens. The most dominant, for the time being, is the fifteen-inch internet screen. But that will be replaced soon by the smartphone screen.

Increasingly, we live in these screens; but no matter what their resolution, they can't compete with reality.

My hope is that after reading the Fourth edition of *How To Read a Film* readers will shut off their screens—all of them—for a few weeks and rediscover the real world.

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: What a long strange trip it's been!

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