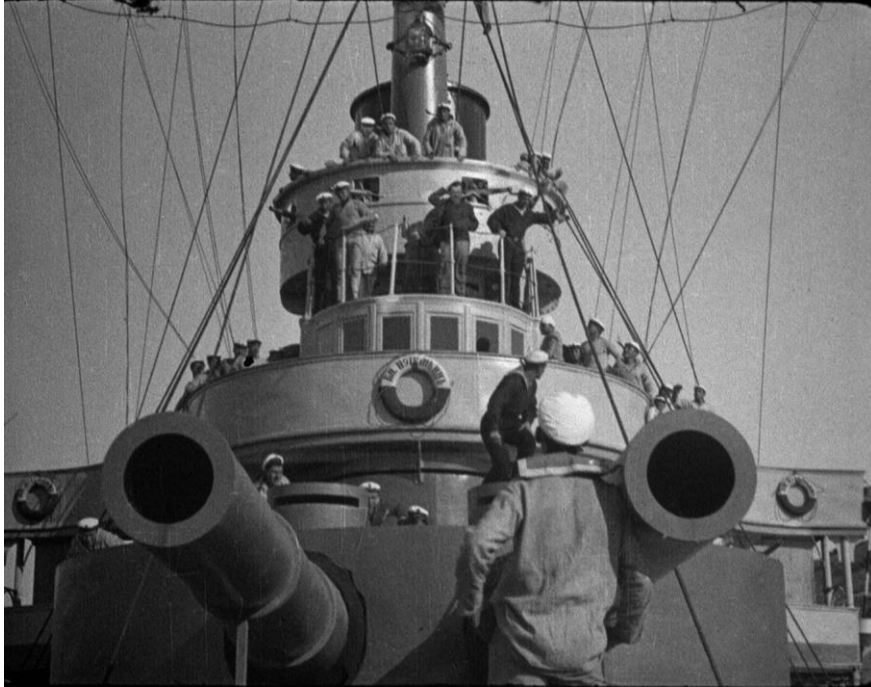


Article

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## Understanding Cinema: Learning to Read an Art Form



*Battleship Potemkin*

### Abstract

This article examines the process of learning to understand cinema as both a medium of communication and an art form. It argues that cinema, like any cultural medium, requires interiorization of its signs, structures, and technologies before it can be fully appreciated. Drawing from constructivist philosophy, pragmatist psychology, phenomenology, and film theory, the essay outlines how observation, interiorization, and expression shape cinematic perception. Examples from early cinematic history—such as the experiments of Griffith and Méliès, Buñuel’s surrealist provocations, and Soviet montage theory—illustrate how cinema acquired its own language and aesthetic order. The essay also highlights the historical development of film appreciation as a pedagogical practice, from the establishment of the Moscow Film School in 1919 to the creation of film archives and academic courses across Europe and North America. Ultimately, it emphasizes that the study of cinema provides not only aesthetic pleasure but also a deeper awareness of the cultural, social, and technological forces that shape human experience.

### Keywords

Cinema; film appreciation; cinematic language; media technology; aesthetics; cultural interiorization; communication; film studies

## Introduction

Every medium of expression—whether a means of communication, a form of mass media, or an art—requires time to become fully assimilated into human society. Only through repeated practice do people gradually internalize the syntax, conventions, and contextual relations of a medium’s signs—its language, one might say—and thereby learn to experience its aesthetic pleasure. This process of bringing a medium into the domain of comprehension is what may be called its “interiorization.” When a medium becomes interiorized, it enters culture, and as a cultural element, it is absorbed into consciousness itself. Such interiorization is a fundamental precondition for making sense of a medium’s signs (McLuhan, 1994).

Cinema, which emerged in 1895 as both a medium of moving images and a modern art form, achieved its own language and semiotic system within its first quarter-century (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). Since then, it has expanded continuously in expressive range, narrative depth, and aesthetic sophistication. To appreciate cinema as communication, viewers must grasp its signs, language, and contexts. It is precisely this need that gave rise to film appreciation courses worldwide—systematic pedagogical approaches designed to cultivate a deeper understanding of cinema.

## Observation, Interiorization, and Expression

European constructivist philosophy maintains that humans are creators of their own world. Each generation inherits a world already constructed by its predecessors, shaped through the imposition of meanings (Berger

& Luckmann, 1966). By internalizing these meanings, a child becomes a full human being and an integral part of that world, at once its participant and its creator. Understanding and constructing the world thus unfolds through a dialectical process of observation. What is observed becomes internalized, and what is internalized finds external form through expression.

Pragmatist psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934/1967) elaborated this process, describing how individuals move from immediate sensory encounters with the world toward the formation of a “self” capable of communication. Language, for Mead, is not merely a tool for describing reality but the very condition that makes social reality intelligible. Through language and shared symbols, individuals internalize social roles and expectations, transforming mere perception into meaningful consciousness.

Phenomenological thinkers such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty add another dimension: the act of perception is always embodied. Our bodies, as sites of sensation, orient us toward the world and anchor our consciousness. Interiorization, in this sense, is not just cognitive but corporeal. It is through the body that we appropriate signs, rhythms, and relations, and through the body that we later externalize them as expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2012).

The relationship between interiorization and expression is not mechanical but dynamic. Each act of interiorization transforms the self, while each act of expression reconfigures the social world. Semiotic theory clarifies this process: every sign we encounter is a mediation

between our consciousness and the world. When we interiorize a sign—say, a word, a gesture, or a cinematic image—we are not only receiving information but reorganizing our experiential horizon. Later, when we express ourselves, those reorganized horizons manifest outwardly in new forms—whether in speech, gesture, or artistic creation (Eco, 1976).

This dialectic of observation and expression is especially visible in art. To encounter a painting, a poem, or a film is to absorb a world constructed by someone else's interiorization. Yet this absorption does not leave us unchanged: it reworks our perceptual and emotional structures, enabling us to externalize new forms of meaning in return. The cycle continues, generation after generation, creating what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) called the “fusion of horizons”—a constant dialogue between personal perception and shared tradition.

Cinema exemplifies this dynamic powerfully. A viewer watching Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* or Tarkovsky's *Stalker* is not only perceiving images but interiorizing a symbolic order—montage, metaphor, rhythm, atmosphere—that transforms their own perceptual habits. Later, when that viewer speaks, writes, or creates, traces of that cinematic encounter inform their expression. Cinema thus becomes both an art of representation and an art of transformation: it reconfigures the spectator's consciousness by reshaping how they see, hear, and imagine.

Importantly, interiorization always carries the possibility of divergence. Because individuals come with unique life histories, their interpretations of the same signs will differ. One spectator may see in *Un Chien*

*Andalou* (1929) a shocking attack on bourgeois rationality; another may feel it as a profoundly personal provocation. Observation is always filtered through memory, culture, and affect. Hence, interiorization ensures that cinema never produces a single meaning but a plurality of lived responses.

### **Cinema as Technology and Form**

Like all media, cinema is structured through signs but realized through technology. As an audiovisual medium, cinema constructs worlds through the technical orchestration of light and sound, projecting the filmmaker's vision for the spectator's observation. Filmmaker and spectator meet in this space of mediated perception, communicating through their shared grasp of cinematic signs. Both parties must be proficient: filmmakers in shaping experience into images and sounds, and viewers in interpreting them.

Technology determines the expressive possibilities of a medium. Close-ups, slow motion, and fast motion belong naturally to cinema but not to theatre. Editing permits the manipulation of time and space in ways that are impossible in stage performance. Technology thus profoundly shapes cinematic language, rendering it at once expansive and limited, simple and complex (Arnheim, 1957).

Early theorists recognized this technological foundation. Walter Benjamin (1936/2008) argued that cinema shattered the “aura” of traditional art by making mechanical reproduction its very principle, thereby democratizing access to images while also altering their cultural authority. Siegfried Kracauer (1960) emphasized cinema's unique

ability to “redeem physical reality,” suggesting that the medium’s technological apparatus allowed it to reveal truths inaccessible to painting or theatre. André Bazin (1967), conversely, celebrated cinema’s indexicality—its ability to capture the world with unparalleled realism through the camera’s mechanical eye. Each of these perspectives illustrates that cinema’s aesthetic possibilities are inseparable from its technical conditions.

Consider montage. The capacity to cut, rearrange, and juxtapose shots emerges only from the camera’s technological ability to record in fragments and the editor’s tools to recombine them. Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein exploited this capacity to create intellectual montage, where meaning arose not from individual shots but from their collision. In contrast, Italian neorealists such as De Sica or Rossellini used long takes and location shooting, leaning on technological portability and postwar film stock availability to construct a different kind of cinematic realism.

The technological dimension also explains why cinematic forms have shifted so dramatically over time. Silent cinema depended on intertitles, exaggerated acting, and musical accompaniment, while synchronized sound transformed narrative possibilities, allowing dialogue-driven plots and more subtle performances. Similarly, the introduction of color reshaped the visual field, enabling filmmakers to experiment with mood, symbolism, and spectacle.

Technology not only expands cinema’s expressive range but also imposes constraints. Early cameras, heavy and immobile, restricted movement, producing tableaux-like

compositions. The development of lightweight cameras in the mid-twentieth century, combined with faster film stocks, made *cinéma vérité* and documentary realism possible. Today, digital cinematography and CGI have extended cinema’s reach into realms of pure simulation, producing hybrid worlds that blur the boundaries between the real and the artificial. Yet, even in such cases, technology frames perception: a digital image is not “free” but structured by algorithms, rendering engines, and post-production processes.

The encounter with unfamiliar technologies can be disorienting. Anthropological accounts note that communities unacquainted with photography or cinema often experienced images as uncanny distortions rather than representations (Geertz, 1973). Likewise, first encounters with cinema, such as the Lumière brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895), provoked visceral responses in audiences who had never seen moving images on a screen. Such reactions underscore how cinematic form is not self-evident but must be learned as a cultural competence.

Crucially, technology also mediates how cinema relates to time and memory. Editing can compress, expand, or fracture temporal experience. Slow motion reveals details invisible to the naked eye; flashbacks collapse past and present; montage constructs rhythms that shape emotional response. As Tarkovsky (1986) famously argued, cinema is an “art of sculpting in time,” made possible only by its technological capacity to register and reorder temporal flow.

In sum, cinema's technological foundation is not a neutral backdrop but the very condition of its aesthetics. The cinematic language of images, sounds, and rhythms is born within the possibilities and limits of its apparatus. From the mechanical crank of the hand-held camera to today's digital compositing software, technology both opens and circumscribes cinema's expressive field. To understand cinema as art, one must therefore understand cinema as technology: its magic resides precisely in the tension between machine and imagination, apparatus and expression.

### **Film Studies and the Training of Appreciation**

For today's audiences, immersed from birth in an unbroken flow of still and moving images, cinematic reality is rarely difficult to grasp. Yet, as with all art forms, a deep appreciation of cinema is not instinctive. It requires training, reflection, and the development of interpretive skills. To see a film is not necessarily to understand it. Just as music requires familiarity with rhythm and harmony, and literature demands sensitivity to language and narrative, cinema demands knowledge of its structure, its techniques, and the cultural frameworks that shape it. This recognition gave rise to what we now call *film appreciation*—an organized effort to cultivate cinematic literacy.

Although the cinematic order developed rapidly through the experimental energies of early filmmakers, formalized education in cinema emerged more slowly. In the earliest decades of cinema—roughly up to the 1920s—technical training was largely artisanal. Directors, cinematographers, and

editors learned their craft through apprenticeship in studios and production houses. The artistry of cinema was understood as a craft skill, not as a field of intellectual inquiry. Parallel to this, however, the rise of film criticism in newspapers, journals, and cultural magazines opened a different path. Writers like Ricciotto Canudo in France began to call cinema the “Seventh Art,” and intellectuals across Europe and America debated its cultural and philosophical significance (Abel, 1988). This laid the groundwork for a more systematic understanding of film.

The first serious institutional initiative was in Soviet Russia, where cinema was recognized not only as an entertainment form but as a powerful social and political instrument. Lenin's famous dictum that “of all the arts, cinema is the most important” underscored the recognition of cinema's capacity to shape mass consciousness. In 1919, this recognition took institutional form with the establishment of the Moscow Film School (later VGIK), the world's first formal training institute in cinema. Figures such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Lev Kuleshov were both practitioners and theorists, developing the foundations of montage theory, camera psychology, and cinematic semiotics (Taylor, 1998). In their work, practice and theory were inseparable, and this fusion created a model for film education that has endured to this day.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe and the United States, the institutionalization of film studies followed a different trajectory. In the 1930s, film archives were established in major cities—Stockholm, Berlin, London, Paris, and New York. These archives served a

dual function: preservation of cinema as cultural heritage and cultivation of critical discourse through curated screenings and post-screening discussions. The French Cinémathèque, founded in 1936, became legendary as a site where future filmmakers such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard encountered the global history of cinema, an experience that later fueled the French New Wave. In this sense, the archive was not only a repository but a classroom—a place where spectators became critics and eventually creators.

The practice of film appreciation matured further in universities. By the mid-twentieth century, courses on cinema had been introduced in American and European institutions, initially under the umbrella of literature, theatre, or communication studies. The post-World War II period saw the rapid expansion of these programs. In France, the rise of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and auteur theory in the 1950s reshaped critical discourse, giving students and scholars new interpretive tools for reading films as works of individual artistic vision (Truffaut, 1954/1976). In the Anglo-American academy, the 1960s and 1970s brought the infusion of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory into film studies, producing landmark works by Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, and others. Film studies thus became an interdisciplinary field, drawing from philosophy, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and political theory.

At its heart, however, film appreciation retained its original pedagogical mission: to cultivate sensitivity to the cinematic order. Appreciation is not passive enjoyment; it is active reading. It involves recognizing how a

film's form—its use of framing, montage, mise-en-scène, sound, and rhythm—produces meaning. It requires contextualization: understanding how films reflect and respond to their historical and cultural moment. It also involves comparative analysis: seeing how one film echoes, challenges, or transforms the conventions of others. In this way, film appreciation deepens the viewer's relationship with cinema, transforming the act of watching into an act of critical and aesthetic engagement.

Today, film appreciation and film studies are global phenomena. Universities on every continent offer degrees in cinema studies, while film festivals, museums, and online platforms extend appreciation beyond the academy. Courses in film history and theory teach students not only how to analyze films but how to see cinema as part of broader cultural and political life. Online streaming, digital restoration, and virtual archives have further expanded access to cinematic heritage, creating new publics for film appreciation.

Ultimately, the training of appreciation is about cultivating cinematic consciousness. To study cinema is to learn how to enter its world, to recognize its codes, and to respond to its invitations. This is why film appreciation matters: it transforms spectators into informed readers of images, capable of discerning not only the pleasures of cinema but also its powers—its capacity to shape memory, identity, and imagination.

## Conclusion

Cinema is not simply a form of entertainment or a vehicle for narrative; it is one of the most profound cultural inventions of modernity. As a medium, it unites technology, art, and

communication, fusing them into a language that is at once intuitive and constructed, representational and symbolic. Yet, like any language, cinema must be learned before it can be fully appreciated. To grasp its aesthetic and cultural significance requires training in how to read its codes, interpret its forms, and situate its meanings within broader historical, social, and philosophical contexts.

Film appreciation is, therefore, not an ancillary pursuit but a vital dimension of cultural literacy. Just as we teach literature to cultivate sensitivity to language, or philosophy to sharpen conceptual thought, the study of cinema trains perception itself. It makes visible the mechanisms by which images generate emotion, memory, and ideology. It equips viewers to distinguish between passive consumption and active interpretation. In an age saturated with visual media, such critical capacity is more essential than ever.

Moreover, cinema appreciation reveals the dialogical nature of human expression. Filmmakers and spectators are bound in a relationship of shared codes and mutual interiorization: the director externalizes an inner vision through technological means, while the viewer internalizes these signs and reconfigures them into personal meaning. In this exchange, cinema becomes not only an art form but a mode of collective reflection—a mirror of society and, simultaneously, a tool for shaping it.

The institutional history of film studies—from the Moscow Film School to the

Cinémathèque Française, from the journals of early critics to contemporary university programs—illustrates how appreciation and scholarship together have sustained cinema's vitality. Without archives, criticism, and pedagogy, much of cinema's richness would be lost to time or reduced to superficial consumption. With them, cinema is preserved, interrogated, and continually reinterpreted for new generations.

To appreciate cinema, then, is not only to understand films but also to understand ourselves. Cinema shows us how human beings construct realities, translate emotions into images, and confront the mysteries of time, memory, and imagination. It is an art of light and shadow, but also of consciousness and culture. In cultivating appreciation, we develop awareness of how technologies mediate perception, of how stories embody collective memory, and of how aesthetics open doors to ethical and political reflection.

In this sense, film appreciation is both aesthetic education and civic practice. It prepares us to encounter cinema not merely as entertainment but as a form of knowledge, a reservoir of human creativity, and a living archive of collective experience. To learn how to read cinema is to enter into a dialogue with history, with culture, and with the imagination of others. This dialogue is what sustains cinema as one of the most significant art forms of our time—and one of the most revealing mirrors of what it means to be human.

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