

Art and the Heart – Film’s Biggest Misunderstanding

If you’ve read the four articles I’ve written so far, hopefully you can see a theme emerging: the audience’s relationship with the films they’re watching. I thought this would be a good way of keeping this column from becoming just another bitter string of movie reviews from some *movie guy* you’ve never heard of, measuring films in rotten vegetables or some such nonsense. My goal is to explore the deeper philosophies behind film and how all varieties of the pastime we call “The Movies” intersect through one unifying element: people.

It really comes down to personal interpretations by the filmmakers of what the craft *is* and interpretations by the audience members about what it *does*, but I think it’s safe to assume movies are made for and by people. And people, generally speaking, desire the same things out of life, and therefore, want the same things from art, even if their movies begin and end as entertainments. I’m kind of going beyond individual taste and speaking to concepts more abstract, trying to focus on how movies affect us in the larger scope of things, which they certainly do, even if we don’t realize it. And I’d like to comment on one of the biggest misunderstandings in cinema history, the one that has kept art films in the margins of the movie-going public. It goes all the way back to my first article (yes, I’ve been planning this since the very beginning!) where I discussed the deceptive nature of movies (I used the word manipulation) and how film was the art form that had the most powerful ability to *suggest* something to us.

I take this mysteriously magical ability as evidence that film is supposed to penetrate us on a subconscious level, not be whittled down to painfully obvious tropes so that we can leave the room for ten minutes or answer a phone call and still know what’s happening in the story. However, most people try to muscle their way through art films (or films slightly less conventional) with nothing but their brains, leaving their hearts in the lobby. This, in a nutshell, is why challenging cinema is lost on most American audiences, it is our desire to *understand* every element of a movie before it even finishes happening that stands in the way of us *feeling* the atmosphere those images and words and plot-points create. As soon as a curveball is thrown our way, designed to make us feel something different and perhaps difficult, we reject it and view it as something that is trying to fool us. We take a film that is intended to connect us emotionally as an intellectual affront, calling it pretentious or confusing, when in fact, many times, the movies are uncommonly simple. Gilliam’s *Tideland* and Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* come to mind. Both of them deal with the lives of children and both simplify their story in order to reflect the more innocent viewpoint of a child. What both films lacked was a conventional storyline and therefore were met with hostile criticism. Now, it may sound like I’m saying these ambitious films don’t want us to think. That’s not true either. But they want us to think *after* the film has ended, on

the drive home, while lying in bed, over coffee with a friend the next day and with any luck, for the rest of our lives. During the film itself, however, all it wants is for you to feel your way through it, absorb all the information it's *suggesting* to you and finally... submit yourself to it. Ahh, there's that word: *submit*. Yes, you must turn yourself over to something. You must play by the film's rules. You have to admit that you're not in control for two hours and simply experience something. This is because all we have from a movie is what it gives us. It gives us characters, motives about why we should care for them, environments and finally varying degrees of story that link everything together on the surface. It sets the boundaries for our imaginations and emotions. If we don't simply accept what the film gives to us, constantly trying to add our own context, how are we ever to understand what the film is attempting to tell us?

Here we double-back to the manipulation element of film, for you may be saying to yourself: "How do I abandon all of my pre-movie thoughts, feelings, judgements and preconceptions? They're in me. I feel and think them naturally."

This is a good question, but one with a simple answer. It's true everything is subjective. The color red means something different to every audience member viewing the same film, it also means something different to the filmmaker using the color red to instigate a feeling from you, but if you're able to truly submit and engage yourself to the movie, you'll be able to see a pattern and understand, if not temporarily adopt, the film's intended use of red. It's resisting the urge to put up an intellectual wall when an emotional bridge is needed that opens up a doorway to a less conventional film and let's you have a rewarding experience.

By now, being subjected to relentless formula and mediocrity, you may find the feeling of uncertainty about a film's story troubling. The movie might have worked in turning some gears within you, but you still don't like feeling "lost," and you're saying once again to yourself, "I feel! I cried at *such and such* movie! And I wasn't so confused, either!"

Well, it's true, most movies, even the conventional ones, achieve success in absorbing you, connecting you emotionally. That's what movies are and the cinema will only die when we make and view movies as intellectual enterprises, but the fact remains: you're being manipulated. The only question is, how severely? Poor films will use sentimental music, overwrought acting and writing, cliched stories to evoke something within you. They will be more concerned with using your emotions as a way of providing answers (morally compromised answers usually). But a better film will use it's powers of misdirection, manipulation and suggestion more admirably, to pose questions, leaving you to answer them.