Cinematography
& Psychology

WRITTEN AND
DIRECTED BY
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One of my favorite feelings takes place between two windows. Rain thudding behind the pane of glass. Watching people open umbrellas and dodge puddles. Surrounded by sound[1].

drum

        splash

drip

        swish

There's something cool about shared experiences. In those moments, I'm sitting on an artificial beach (broadcasted live) or waiting for a bus in the shape of a feline. I have cool light both behind and in front of me (through clouds and through a screen, respectively). A rain sandwich.

Another shared experience: leaving a movie theatre.

THE EXIT

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[1] Dolby Surround Sound

1   **INT. MOVIE THEATRE - NIGHT**

Darkness gives way to warm lights.

> VOICE-OVER
> (or maybe you're uncool and left
> the theatre before the lights
> came on)

You make your way out the door to be met by more lights which are increasingly bright. You walk across oddly patterned carpet to more doors — they're heavy — you push until the door gives way.

2   **EXT. MOVIE THEATRE - NIGHT**

And then it's dark.

It wasn't dark when you first pulled open the door.[2]

It feels a little like time travel. You began in one world, experienced another, and exited into an entirely different time (which sounds an awful lot like a plot to a certain movie starring a certain Michael J. Fox).

We go see movies in an attempt to escape for 90-120 minutes—and movies want to immerse us. They want us to pay 10 dollars to see them and leave us wanting more, so we keep coming back. Great filmmakers are great manipulators. Not in a bad way, but in the way that they can make us feel what we want to feel. When we go to see a movie, we're paying to be manipulated, and that's what we want.[3]

Whatever movie you're making, you want people to get so invested that they forget they're watching a movie. Film is a form of storytelling after all. You wouldn't want to read a book and constantly think about the fact that you're reading. When you read a good book, you think about the story.[4]

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[2] This is not a correctly formatted screenplay, it will never be made into a movie. To get producers to care about your movie enough to make it, you need to convince them that *you* care about it. Either I do not care about this film or I do not plan on sending it to any producers, who knows.

[3] Mutualism.

[4] Unless you've analyzing the writing I suppose, but the writing techniques exist to tell the story—just like how cinematography can work to support a story. (Ask any film bro about *Citizen Kane* and they can expand on this)

Films have become so successful in immersing us that virtual reality and video games seek to mimic the effect cinematography has on us.[5] This is pretty cool if you think about it, you would think virtual reality would be the most immersive form of media.

Another aspect is story and graphics. Take *Avatar* as an extreme example: there were reported cases of depression and dissatisfaction with the real world after experiencing the world of Pandora.[6] We can also thank *Avatar* for the increased popularity of 3D movies.[7] *Avatar* took its immersive world to such a level that viewers needed more.

In early films, there was only one camera angle and the viewing experience was similar to viewing a play. If you've ever had a bad seat at a play, you can imagine that this filming technique disconnects you from the story.

Films today are constantly evolving and employing new methods to capture viewers' attention. James Cutting, a professor of psychology at Cornell, studies "how popular movies have evolved and how their evolution relates to visual perception."[8] One of the aspects that Cutting has noticed is Fractal Patterns, which are certain moments that are repeated on a larger scale (like patterns in scenes that repeat). After collecting data on factors including shot lengths, luminance, and movement, Cutting found that popular movies from 1915 to 2015 exhibited these fractal-like patterns. Ultimately, these fractals contribute to the "rhythm of the movie", which can be shaped by filmmakers to further entrance viewers.

As Cutting puts it, "one can study the structure of movies and learn quite a lot about the structure of the human mind."[9]

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[5] Diana Phillips Mahoney, "Lights, Camera, Interaction." *Computer Graphics World*, April 2000. "CameraCreature" (a virtual cinematography system) automatically manipulates camera position, motion, and lighting through a system of sensors, emotions, motivations, and actions. Inspired by expressive and sporadic cinematography similar to that of *Blair Witch Project*! Super cool.

[6] Maher, Kevin. "Movie Blues: Cinemagoers Captivated by the 3-D Movie Avatar have Suffered Depression and Even Contemplated Suicide After Leaving the Theatre and Rejoining the Real World. Kevin Maher Investigates the Na'Vi Phenomenon." *The Times*, Jan 19, 2010, https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/movie-blues/docview/320392502/se-2?accountid=194618/.

[7] *Avatar* to collection of "stolen" 3D glasses pipeline.

[8] Science Department, "What Makes a Movie Interesting? the Psychology behind Filmmaking," The Cornell Daily Sun (Cornell, February 24, 2019), https://cornellsun.com/2019/02/24/what-makes-a-movie-interesting-the-psychology-behind-filmmaking/.

[9] If my mind was a movie, it would probably be *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. (I'm kidding, please don't take this seriously)

3   INT. HOME - NIGHT

You are lying in bed. Everything in your room seems dull. In your
room, there is no score composed for the purpose of conveying
your every action or emotion. In your room, there is no camera
pan as you reach over for your phone. In your room, the music
doesn't build as you type an address into a search engine. In
your room, there is no audience on the edge of their seats as you
hit the large orange button reading "PURCHASE". In your room,
there is no fade to black after you've finished purchasing
tickets to see the same movie, again, the next day.

FIN.

Bibliography

Diana Phillips Mahoney, "Lights, Camera, Interaction." *Computer Graphics World*, April 2000

> This article from Computer Graphics World describes "CameraCreature" (a virtual cinematography system) that automatically manipulates camera position, motion, and lighting through a system of sensors, emotions, motivations, and actions. Inspired by expressive and sporadic cinematography similar to that of Blair Witch Project. This article was extremely helpful in illustrating the extent that film immerses us. The fact that virtual reality is incorporating cinematic techniques reveals just how effective film is in entrancing viewers.

Maher, Kevin. "Movie Blues: Cinemagoers Captivated by the 3-D Movie Avatar have Suffered Depression and Even Contemplated Suicide After Leaving the Theatre and Rejoining the Real World. Kevin Maher Investigates the Na'Vi Phenomenon." The Times, Jan 19, 2010, https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/movie-blues/docview/320392502/se-2?accountid=194618/

> In this article, Maher explores reports of increased depression and withdrawal symptoms after watching the movie *Avatar*. The article discusses everything from the graphics to the story, placing emphasis on the realism of the graphics and details of the world.

> Reading about the impact of a particular movie gave me insight into the psychological aspect of film, leaving me with more questions about other film techniques and their effects. While Avatar isn't a movie that had a great impact on me, it was interesting to read about a movie that emphasized mainly visual and storytelling techniques instead of cinematic techniques.

Science Department, "What Makes a Movie Interesting? the Psychology behind Filmmaking," The Cornell Daily Sun (Cornell, February 24, 2019), https://cornellsun.com/2019/02/24/what-makes-a-movie-interesting-the-psychology-behind-filmmaking/

> This article describes a study in which data was collected on the different cinematic techniques seen in popular films. James Cutting, a professor of psychology at Cornell, studies the evolution of movies and cinematic techniques. Cutting discusses Fractal Patterns, certain moments that are repeated on a larger scale. After collecting data on

factors including shot lengths, luminance, and movement, Cutting found that popular movies from 1915 to 2015 exhibited these fractal-like patterns. Ultimately, these fractals contribute to the "rhythm of the movie", which can be shaped by filmmakers to further entrance viewers.

This study was interesting as it found common patterns in film, giving insight into what techniques are most effective and what effects they have psychologically.

Intention Statement

"Cinematography & Psychology" is a lyrical essay about common experiences and feelings watching films and the cinematic techniques that contribute to these feelings. I chose to write this lyrical essay in both first person and second person to convey my personal experiences and put the reader into these experiences. Starting off, I formatted the title of my essay similar to that of a movie title (heavily inspired by Tarantino). I then opened my essay with the metaphor of "two windows", describing watching a movie with rain while it is also raining outside. I used the metaphor to convey that film is, in a way, a window. I played with indentation and font color to convey the sound of being surrounded by rain.

During peer review, my peers enjoyed the snippets of stories in my essay and suggested that I format it like a screenplay. I implemented this idea to illustrate a scene in which a character (the reader) is leaving a movie theatre. I found this to be a fun way to put the reader into a story as well as have them experience reading a screenplay. Since screenplays are written to help illustrate what is visually happening in the story, I thought this was a cool way to have the reader consume the story. Beyond this, my peers enjoyed the commentary I included in my footnotes and suggested I add more. As I wrote, I added more footnotes and found that it made my essay more personal and conversational.

Following this section, my research sources were particularly helpful in analyzing why we feel the way we do when we watch movies. I used my research sources to take a step back from lyrical storytelling and analyze film technique and their effects on viewers. In a way, my choice to begin the essay more poetically and transition into discussing research conveys my thought process behind the essay. I began by thinking about my own experiences and as I wrote, I came up with a lot of "why" questions to research.

At the end of my essay, I brought back the screenplay from earlier as an ending to both the screenplay and the essay. I tied this back to how filmmakers want to leave us wanting more, putting the reader into a situation where their own world no longer compares to the cinematic world they experienced.

This essay is very much inspired by David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster". I was inspired by his creative use of footnotes and implemented this into my own essay, adding analysis of sources or any random connections or thoughts. I was also inspired by how deep he dove into his topic and how he expanded upon his topic. When I was implementing research into my essay, I kept this in mind.