

Hang it on a Wall and Find Meaning

Paper 1
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Film is a mediator. Film facilitates the mediation of information – in the form of the narratives and stories told – from storyteller to consumer, allowing opportunities for translation and interpretation of the narratives and meanings along the way. When watching a film whether that be in the cinema or at home on the TV viewers seek to consume the story and briefly live in the world that the story is placed in. Filmmakers attempt to seamlessly create and tell their stories in a way that is easy to understand and draws attention to the important aspects of the narrative. What viewers may see as a simple choice – maybe even an accident – is more often than not a meticulously planned decision made by the director or cinematographer to actively draw in the viewers attention and specifically guide them through their story. Many theories are used to explain how filmmakers go about this, and the one to be brought to attention here is the concept of ‘cinema as frame’. So how does ‘cinema as frame’ help viewers and filmmakers understand how films are watched/ to be watched?

What is ‘cinema as frame’? Cinema as frame is a theory that can be seen to attempt to add or impose meaning onto reality (Bazin 317). The theory of frame “highlights the content of the (opaque) surface and its constructed nature, effectively implying composition and artificiality” basically stating that it tries to focus on the film as something that is constructed (FT 16). Cinema as frame also ties in with formalist and/or constructivist theory due to its emphasis on viewing films in terms of their construction and composition, and then seeks to find how film can transform what the viewer knows and sees. If one were to look at the movie *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock 1954) through a cinema as frame lens then the viewer would watch it understanding that each aspect presented has a meaning and a purpose, which in turn can reflect onto the viewer's experience and life. There is the notion that to watch cinema as frame is to be the ‘victim’ in that because the audience is attempting to understand the movie, its creation and

thus storyline, they are to be invested and immersed into the story leaving them at the mercy of the ups and downs of the narrative. In *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) the movie is composed in a way that we only experience and view the same things as the main character ‘Jeff’ and thus the entire narrative and narrative experience is framed from exactly his point of view. The framing of *Rear Window* is “concentrating the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose” thus fitting into the formalist/constructivist and frame theories (FT 27).

Cinema as frame is often contrasted to to another theory ‘cinema as window’. A simple way of explaining the difference between frame and window is “one looks through a window, but one looks at a frame” (FT 15). Cinema as window is also paired with another theory – realist theory – and it differs from frame theory in that rather than focusing on the composition of a film it directs focus onto the unobtainable view of reality that a film can create. Window theory aims to “extend beyond the limit of the image”(FT 18-19) and to create and portray a world that might exist separately from the audience. As a result of window theory seeking to create its ‘own world’ it also impacts the viewing experience for the audience, in that as opposed to frame leaving the audience as a “victim” of the film it leaves the viewer as a “guest” (FT 18). The distinction between the viewer as a guest or a victim can also be interpreted as “[the viewer’s] body and the senses do not disappear but change places: from being the subject in realist theories, they become the object in constructivist theories” (FT 27). Viewers as a subject or object highlights the relationship that there seems to be a level of removal for the viewer when looking through frame theory.

To be treated as the ‘object’ as opposed to the ‘subject’ can showcase the impact of the film on the individual and reiterate a point previously made by Elsaesser and Hagener, in that because the viewer is the ‘object’ or ‘victim’ of the film, the film seems to have a more personal

impact on the viewer. The film theory suggests that rather than extending the film past the screen in the form of an extended world – as in window – the film is somewhat extended in the feeling and experience that is imprinted onto the viewer – however they choose to interpret – and those feelings, opinions, and other impacts are translated through each viewer into their lives.

Furthermore the way film is itself perceived as presented by Elsaesser and Hagener fuels the frame theory: “Perception is limited to the visual dimension: the sense and data processing are thought of as highly rational, while the primary goal is to consciously work through what is being perceived” (FT 16). Elsaesser and Hagener’s note of the way film is perceived can then highlight how frame theory also ties into the concept of closed or open films. Cinema as a frame fits in with closed films, as a closed film only contains the necessary information for the narrative being portrayed, and thus only seeks to tell the immediate story rather than build a whole alternate reality – which would be an open film and then tie into window theory. Frame theory and a closed film “[create] a potent dynamic between off screen and on screen space” (FT 18). *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) again highlights frame theory in that every aspect of the film drives the distinct narrative of the film without really building up an ‘alternate world’.

Up until now frame theory has been highlighted in an almost aggressive way, or rather ‘energy consuming’. To single out the viewer and force them to be an ‘object’ within the narrative of the film makes watching a movie that embodies cinema as frame seem somewhat uncomfortable. However, Elsaesser and Hagener present a kind of solution to this in the form of distance. Distance, whether that be metaphorical or physical, is presented as a way of increasing the ‘safety’ of the viewers. Safety in this sense seems to be centered around emotional discomfort, especially considering the previously mentioned aspect of film leaving “perception limited to the visual dimension” (FT 16). For an audience to be ‘at risk’ in terms of frame theory,

is to be the level of interpretation and invested emotions placed on a presented narrative within the film.

The level of ‘emotional toll’ taken from each narrative is then somewhat subjective, with each viewer taking in their own lived experiences – paratexts too – and their experiences being influenced by them. An example of individual influence could be seen by two people watching *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock 1963) – one person with diagnosed acrophobia and the other not – they will both watch the same movie framed in the same way yet the information that they take away will be different due to what is of most interest to them. Safety in relation to frame, could then be found through this notion of distance, especially the metaphorical, as the narrative presented would most likely be more enjoyable for the viewer without acrophobia as there are little ‘triggering’ aspects. However, safety doesn’t always have to correlate with comfort, as certain viewers might be seeking a less passive viewing experience. However, it is worth highlighting that “Window and frame, [host] an inherent split between passive and active” (FT 20). Safety, can thus, be highlighted as a highly subjective ideal, with distance following suit.

Overall it seems that cinema as film presents a theory from which films are critiqued and analyzed by viewers in relation to their construction and immediate structure. To watch through a ‘frame’ is to view what is placed in front of you and once the film concludes so does the narrative. However, the emotions, feelings and maybe even ideas portrayed by the narrative stay with the viewer and can inform their actual realities, as opposed to the constructed one just viewed. Through frame placing their viewers as victims, it is worth noting that a level of ‘safety’ might be provided through distancing oneself with the narratives that they might be emotionally close to or maybe even placing physical distance. It is worth noting that physical distance is

sometimes as simple as obscuring part of the screen with one's hand to hide aspects that cause discomfort, and is not always physical distance in relation to the screen.