



Joseph D. Anderson. *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. xiv + 200 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2000-4.

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Published on H-PCAACA (April, 1996)

## Cognitive Film Theory with Some Applications

Does the principle of “the survival of the fittest” pertain only to our ability to sit through a film that breaks the three-hour barrier, or can it be relevant to film theory? To this point, film theorists have drawn on the insights and categories of people such as Freud and Marx, but not Darwin. Joseph D. Anderson has changed all that.

Whereas traditional film theory builds on the assumption that we can substitute a cinematic for a literary text, Anderson argues that experiencing a film, notwithstanding its illusory or fictional nature, is more like perceiving the real world than reading a book. Accordingly, he turns to the cognitive sciences, such as neurophysiology, anthropology, and developmental and experimental psychology, to construct a cognitive film theory.

This alternative to the more traditional approaches examines the ways in which the human perceptual system has evolved over the centuries to enhance our chance of survival in the real world. It then analyzes our response to the illusory world of film in terms of the same principles and procedures of perception and cognition.

The first chapter offers a primer of film theory and the next two chapters offer a primer of cognitive science. With this foundation, chapter four addresses some perennial film problems: How does a succession of stills convey a sense of motion? How is a sense of depth reflected on a flat screen? Why does color remain constant for natural vision, but not for photography or cinematography? Chapter five brings hearing into the discussion along with seeing, since film is bimodal—visual and aural. Chapters six through nine relate the human capacity for survival, especially the rules of visual and aural processing of the experience of our world, to elements of film—continuity, diegesis, character, and narrative. In these chapters Anderson elaborates the brief statement in the Introduction: “To ask how we process continuity and character and narrative in motion pictures is to ask how the forces of evolution equipped us to know where we are in space and time, to make rapid judgments of

character, and to narratize the events of our existence” (p. 15). Chapter 10, the Conclusion, explores the interface between the illusory world of films and the human mind’s capacity for processing reality as a means of survival, explaining how and why we enjoy participating in films.

In short, Anderson has proposed a novel but plausible theory and has supported it with a logical line of reasoning. Unfortunately, he does not develop the application to specific films. Only two films, *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*, get as much as six or seven pages of discussion and only four additional films are even referenced.

More than half the discussion of *Casablanca* is a shot analysis of one sequence in which the terminology (close-up, over-the-shoulder, shot-reverse-shot and so on) is hardly unique to cognitive film theory. What Anderson does add is that humans have a neurophysiological mechanism, probably in or controlled by the hippocampus, which allows us to “mentally revisit” places we have previously experienced without actually returning to them (p. 108). This premise, along with an earlier discussion of cuts, enables Anderson to analyze continuity editing in terms of three “specific perceptual capacities of the human mind” (p. 109).

In the case of *Citizen Kane*, Anderson relates characterization to the way in which our ability to judge character is a key survival factor (pp. 127-29). Anderson also relates this film to the risk we take when we decide with whom we will identify (pp. 138-43).

What Anderson gives us is not so much different analyses of these films, but a way to understand the analyses of them differently. I am a little disappointed that cognitive film theory does not yield more insights on the interpretation of specific films, but I am grateful for its opening up of a new perspective on the meta-language of film.

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**Citation:** Harold Hatt. Review of Anderson, Joseph D., *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=405>

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