‘Film theory’ is best thought of as a substantive field of inquiry in which are clustered a number of discrete theories of cinema. No one system of propositions governs the entire field – in other words, there is no single, monolithic ‘film theory’ that film scholars unanimously endorse. For a newcomer to the field, the nonexistence of a definitive theory of cinema can be frustrating. But we should keep in mind that the fields of the traditional arts – literature, painting, theatre, music – also house a range of theoretical perspectives, and the diversity of approaches enriches each tradition. Since the 1960s, film theory has fostered a diverse set of paradigms. Yet this is not cause for frustration. The jousting of theoretical approaches, the skirmishes among theorists, the flourishing of some theories and the decline of others – such undulations have pushed film studies into enlightening and fruitful areas of discovery. The lack of a ‘master theory’ of cinema, then, is not to the detriment of film theory. Knowledge springs from debate. Precisely what makes the field of film theory so fascinating – apart from the concrete emphases of the paradigms themselves – is the sheer range of theories that it encompasses, and the intellectual tussles that break out among them. What is Film Theory? bears witness to the exhilarating heterogeneity of contemporary film theory.

The enigma posed in the title of this book begs another question – why study film theory at all? Of what use is a theory of film? For one thing, theories of cinema can help us understand the medium better. By framing general questions about cinematic phenomena, theorists try to disclose the way films work, how they convey meaning, what functions they provide, and the means by which they affect us. Exploring theoretical questions about the medium helps us to grasp the *phenomenon* of cinema, its broad systems, structures, uses, and effects – and these prototypical features can, in turn, enable us to better understand the workings of individual films.

To read film theory, moreover, is to be enlightened to cinema’s importance for this and other generations. From what angles have commentators theorized film? What questions were most pressing for the theorist at different historical junctures? How have theoretical approaches to cinema changed as the medium’s technologies and conditions of consumption...
have changed? Film theory fascinates and instructs partly because it can illuminate cinema's role within history and culture. Theorists putting cultural forces at the centre of their concerns have furnished explanations for the social *raison d'être* of cinema; they have investigated how different audiences appropriate movies for particular purposes; and they have probed the degree to which films `reflect' society. One major asset of film theory, then, lies in its capacity to lay bare cinema's significance for our own cultural lives, as well as for other cultures and historical epochs.

Film theory also warrants attention because it dialogically responds and gives salience to key shifts in cinema's evolution. In no sense is film theory wholly divorced from the realm of practical film-making. Rather, theory closely shadows the progress of film production, and often launches general inquiries concerning coeval phenomena, e.g. thriving generic trends, technological innovations, new forms of consumption, and so forth. Reciprocally, film theory has informed film-making, at times in purposive ways. Developing alongside film production, film theory alerts us to fresh conundrums, posits explanations, and reminds us that the cinema is a complex, sometimes enigmatic medium. Film theory endures for a simple reason: movies make us *think*.

**The advent of contemporary film theory**

*What is Film Theory?* surveys the field of film theory since the 1960s. Why choose this decade as a starting point? Most generally the 1960s provide the springboard for what is called `contemporary film theory'; more concretely, this new phase in the field's evolution can be traced to a set of historically contingent causes. It behoves us then, to provide some necessary context for the chapters that follow. If film theory swerved drastically in the late 1960s, what were the major factors propelling this shift forward?

**The academicization of film studies**

Film studies is entrenched in university departments as an academic field of study. The academicization of film studies took root in the late 1960s, as humanities scholars imported film analysis into traditional humanistic programmes. Stimulated by a more widespread renaissance of cinephilia within American culture, young professors and students took seriously the study of cinema as an intellectual pursuit. Students in literature classes attacked *The Searchers* (1956) and *Psycho* (1960) with hermeneutic fervour. Budding philosophers debated the existential worldviews of Bergman and Antonioni. By the early 1970s, film departments had sprung up across North American universities, though not without resistance from conservative elements within the academy. Never seeing film academia as an intellectually credible enterprise, this contingent viewed the advent of film studies with condescension and derision, ensuring film studies a bumpy pathway into the university milieu. Admitting film programmes into the academy thus entailed not only pioneering the construction of fully-fledged film departments, but also legitimating `film' as an intellectual field of study.

University film courses proliferated rapidly, but the discipline's academic entrenchment arose out of a more diffuse set of historical circumstances. First, the unparalleled wave of cinephilia that saturated American culture at the start of the 1960s saw youth audiences feverishly devour films of different modes, backgrounds, and eras. This new generation of US moviegoers – heirs to post-war `baby boom' affluence and suburbanization – fostered a fresh appreciation of studio-era movies thanks to the network television broadcast of classic Hollywood films.

Soon the 1960s cinephile was able to draw encouragement from the critical establishment. US film critic Andrew Sarris assimilated French auteurism into American culture, arguing for the artistic credentials of Hitchcock, Hawks, and Ford. Pauline Kael, Manny Farber, and other journalistic critics celebrated the achievements of old studio film-makers and championed the fledgling work of new ones. The rediscovery of Hollywood's rich legacy helped crystallize the 1960s film culture, but no less important was the flourishing art cinema tradition in Europe. Films by Bresson, Godard, and Fellini soon became favourites of American film societies and campus cine-clubs. By the late 1960s, the European sensibility had filtered into Hollywood film-making, giving rise to a series of downbeat, counter-cultural films that included *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), and *The Conversation* (1974). This so-called New Hollywood cinema – a strain of European-influenced film-making produced within, and on the margins of, the Hollywood mainstream – showcased a new generation of self-conscious auteurs, and nourished the cinephilia of a youth audience aptly labelled 'The Film Generation'.

Once the US film culture was established, a market for film academia coalesced. Students who had launched campus film clubs now lobbied for an official academicization of film studies. Of course, cinephilia alone did not propel film studies into the academy. Once university administrators realized that film programmes could be profitable, they shrewdly accepted cinema studies into the academic sphere. Film studies held an economic allure for universities, but its proponents had still to establish the field's
scholarly credentials. One step towards this legitimation was the auteur theory, which seemed analogous to the concept of the author in literature. Of the director-auteur, film scholars could presuppose an oeuvre, a stylistic signature, and a distinctive worldview. This affinity with literature was strategically beneficial, for if film studies could be seen to employ the same conceptual frameworks as literary theory, perhaps it could win its spurs as a reputable academic discipline in its own right. Other norms of literary studies found their way into film academia. The 1960s film critics generated a canon of artists – directors from Charles Chaplin to Roman Polanski – one goal of which was to 'establish a system of priorities for the film student' (Sarris 1996: 27). Teachers and students were thus armed with a taxonomy of directors ripe for academic discussion, much as a pantheon of great litterateurs could be examined by students in English departments.

Canons of critical practice were assimilated from literary studies too. A classroom emphasis on close analysis – mirroring a mode of criticism practised in the British journal *Movie* – brought film studies in touch with the literary tradition of practical criticism. Film students could analyse the form, style and themes of cinematic works just as literature students could examine such phenomena in novels and poetry. And if ‘readings’ dominated the New Criticism, so interpretation would be made central to the study of cinema. In part, then, film studies sought legitimation by replicating routine procedures that were firmly entrenched within other areas of the academy.

What was the significance of these developments for film theory? The concrete effects will be examined in the ensuing chapters, but it can generally be argued that 1970s film theory was strongly shaped by the attempts to prove the pedigree of academic film studies. From the late 1960s, film scholars – concerned to justify film studies as an academic discipline – cast about for legitimating paradigms, importing theories from linguistics, cultural theory and psychoanalysis. These paradigms prompted genuine theoretical inquiries – academic critics appropriated interdisciplinary theories to pose general questions about the medium of film, and the goal of enfranchisement could piggyback on the critic's quest for knowledge. Thus a Marxist account of the cinematic apparatus not only kindled theoretical debate within film studies; it also related the medium to current trends of thought regarding culture and ideology, spotlighting the wider pertinence and utility of an academic study of film. Psychoanalytic theory carried legitimizing value too. Grafting psychoanalytic templates onto a film by Hitchcock, Lang, or Preminger could produce fresh, sophisticated ‘readings’, the cogency of which might persuade sceptics of the intellectual weight of the discipline's object of study. Moreover, film theory continued to be underpinned by authorship and interpretation – literary heuristics and routines that helped vindicate film studies in the late 1960s. In all, the particular currents that characterized 1970s film theory bore the traces – more or less transparently – of an ongoing effort to legitimate the academic study of film.

**Resurgence in theoretical writings**

*University presses launch academic film publications, and non-Anglophone theories are translated.* Concurrent with the institutional assimilation of film studies was a resurgence in theoretical writings on cinema. The early 1970s saw the launch of new US film journals, the pages of which could be filled by newly anointed cinema scholars now ensconced in campus film departments. By the mid-1970s, a host of academic periodicals was flooding the market, providing a platform for critical and theoretical discourse. Academic monographs flourished too. Universities promoted and sustained their film departments by publishing works of auteur-centred criticism, venerating directors such as Renoir, Ford, and Welles. Similarly, full-scale books were devoted to film theory, typically in the shape of survey texts and anthologies. The 1970s witnessed a fresh boom in film scholarship, but this surge of activity owed much of its impetus to the need to consolidate the field, as well as to the institutional base into which film studies had been integrated.

As film publications proliferated in the US, a parallel growth market was developing in Great Britain. Essayistic magazines such as *Sight and Sound* contributed, more or less unwittingly, to the dissemination of French auteurism, while new academic journals such as *Movie* and *Screen* pushed film criticism and theory into fresh areas. As the critics at *Movie* sought a new commitment to textual analysis, those at *Screen* inclined in the direction of film theory; indeed, the latter journal would become synonymous with many of the major trends defining film theory in the 1970s – feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and semiotics. *Screen* not only initiated compelling new theories; it reprinted and showcased old ones. In the early 1970s, for instance, the journal published several (selectively chosen) manifestos that had been composed by the Formalists, Constructivists, and Futurists in the early twentieth century. Such harking back to past theories, while mediated by current purposes and concerns, reflected a growing consciousness of early theorizing about art and culture. As they crystallized theories of their own, contemporary film scholars wanted to know what had come before. Reprinting seminal essays provided one means to this goal – and it ensured that 1970s film theory was
defined not only by modern trends, but by the reconsideration and discovery of earlier ones as well.

Another factor helped film theorists exhum their historical antecedents. From the late 1960s, previously inaccessible writings started to become available in English translations, expanding the relatively parochial parameters of Anglophone film theory. Previously untranslated Eisenstein could be mined for contemporary relevance, and grafted onto current theoretical concerns (e.g. Constructivism, psychoanalysis, apparatus theory, semiotics). The full breadth of Bazin’s arguments concerning cinematic realism could be evaluated and juxtaposed against the views of Arnheim and Kracauer, while his modifications of the auteur theory served to powerfully qualify the version of auteurism popularized by Sarris. And contemporary theorists could discover the Russian Formalists’ appeal for a systematic ‘poetics of cinema’, which itself prepared the way for the neoformalist perspectives of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell.

Newer theories received English-language reboots too. Screen published hugely influential translations of Christian Metz, whose psychoanalytic semiology of cinema held sway for several years. By disclosing the heritage and diversity of theoretical approaches to cinema, film scholars could continue to define the field of film studies and foster a canon of critical film writings. Moreover, the rich gamut of ideas that surfaced in the 1970s was apt for contemporary assimilation – varied influences would be alloyed with current, Anglophonic concerns, and disseminated through teeming new film journals and publications.

**Politicoized cultural theories**

Politicized cultural theories are meshed with academic theories of film. Film theory after 1960 compels us for another reason – political upheavals occurring in the USA and Europe cued a major transition in the way films would be theorized in the contemporary period. If the theoretical stakes of some film theory (e.g., Bazin and Arnheim) appeared too narrowly formalistic, now film theory would be animated by a renewed political engagement, aimed explicitly at informing film practice. In Britain, the new political sensitivity was exemplified by ‘Screen theory’, but the journal’s Leftist tenor mirrored a more widespread acceptance of Marxist cultural theory within the academic milieu. Theorists recruited the ideological and aesthetic programmes of Althusser, Brecht and Eisenstein to exhort both politically-charged criticism and politicized modes of film-making. Needless to say, politicizing contemporary film theory constituted one more tactic of legitimation; film theory would brandish its academic stripes by demonstrating that it could shoulder weighty theories bearing broad social importance.

What concrete factors motivated this political awakening? In 1960s America, political engagement had intensified with the mobilizing of a string of social movements. US liberals marched for anti-militarism and anti-discrimination. Protests broke out against the war in South Vietnam. This growing political consciousness seemed wholly detached from US film culture, but many film theorists were politically active, and disaffection within contemporary society was widespread. Out of this historical context came a receptiveness to cultural critique – the American intelligentsia was apt to embrace the Althusserian Marxism that swept into film studies in the late 1960s.

During this period, Parisian society was afflicted by political unrest too. The student protests of May 1968 spread anti-capitalist attitudes and inspired a ground-shifting radicalism. Soon the polemicism of political indignation filtered into French film institutions. Cahiers du cinéma cultivated a stringently Marxist perspective, downplaying its auteurist heritage and pleading itself to political criticism. French film-makers were pressed to radicalize their work by mobilizing aesthetic distance. Some film-makers (e.g., Truffaut, Rohmer) cleaved to conservative styles, but Godard pursued a so-called counter-cinema, disdaining orthodox techniques in favour of a provocative, anti-illusionist aesthetic. One principle of Marxist film theory, that theory ought to inform practice, gradually dwindled over time – we suggest in subsequent chapters how this vision was reconfigured to elevate other concerns. In Godard, however, Marxist film theorists had found their poster child, a film-maker committed to probing the left-wing possibilities and uses of the cinematic medium.

By the early 1970s, leftist Francophone film theory had soaked into a porous British film culture, most notably through the conduit of Screen theory. Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ became a central reference point for the journal’s contributors. As the 1970s wore on, Screen continued to play host to Continental theory, embracing the proponents of French structuralism (Metz, Barthes, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss). Assorted theories were assimilated and intermeshed, producing theoretical hybrids that invariably reinforced Marxist premises. In all, the influence of historical materialism on contemporary film theory is not to be underestimated.

As we have noted, film theory since 1960 compels attention partly because it marks a shift toward an inquiry that is explicitly – perhaps even centrally – of a political and social bias. However, although the paradigms that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s signalled a substantive shift in the history of film theory, they did not represent an absolute break with
foregoing thinking about film. A brief excursion on the emphases of early and classical film theory will lay bare the deviations and continuities characterizing the field in its different historical phases.

**Film theory before 1960**

A glance at the history of classical film theory can be misleading. Film studies pre-1960 seems to pinball unpredictably between different nations, institutions, and historical moments. Theories of cinema spring forth in isolated bursts. The Soviet theorists are conjointed geographically and institutionally, but there is hardly a global community of theorists in dialogue with one another. *Prima facie*, classical film theory can look like a desultory, patchy affair. The fallacy of this impression, however, is that film writings continuously and proliferically appeared throughout the early twentieth century in many regions of the world. Much ink was spilt on this upstart medium. Formative film theory looks erratic only when the era’s most significant theorists – Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Hugo Münterberg, André Bazin, and others – are plucked out of a historical context in which film literature flourished. And if the theories themselves look disparate – and they are strikingly different from one another in a host of ways – they nevertheless are united by shared concerns and goals. The collective work of early film theorists (writing up to 1925) and their classical descendants (1925–60) comprise a diverse and contradictory set of premises, but each theoretical inquiry converges on a common objective: to defend film as a distinctive and authentic mode of art.

How to affirm cinema’s artistic credentials? One theoretical strategy was to measure the medium against traditional criteria for art. This tactic underpins, for instance, Münterberg’s attempt to claim for cinema the goal of organic unity – the perfect synthesis of form and content – which stood as an aesthetic standard for traditional arts like painting, literature and theatre. More generally, theorists sought to particularize the essential properties of cinema, the better to mark it off as a distinctive mode of expression. What are the fundamental features of cinema? How does the medium create meaning? To what specific purposes should film be put? Such questions pushed theorists to define the specificity of cinema, but their theoretical inquiry was mediated by a defensive concern as well. If silent film theorists wanted to validate film as an art, they would have to impugn one of the prevailing prejudices of the day – namely, that photographic media, such as film, were mere copying processes, incapable of artistically shaping the things they recorded. In this view, films served up a mere facsimile of the world, a mechanical reproduction devoid of creative intervention. Believing that the burden of proof lay at their door, classical film theorists set out to demonstrate that cinema could shape its materials in artistic ways.

The exemplary figure here is Rudolf Arnheim, whose study of the silent, black-and-white cinema, *Film as Art* (1957), inventoried the means by which cinema deviated from straightforward mimesis. For Arnheim, the silent cinema transcended its recording capacity by virtue of certain medium-specific properties, as well as through particular defamiliarizing uses of the medium – as Arnheim famously phrased it, ‘art begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off’ (1957: 57). Silent cinema possessed intrinsic formal and technical parameters that transformed whatever was represented on screen. Technicians viewed these parameters as limitations, but Arnheim recognized that such properties were central to film’s distinctiveness as an art form. For one thing, the apparent limitations of the medium yielded an imperfect recording of reality – the cinematographic process flattened out a three-dimensional world; it stripped the world of sound, colour, and other sensorial phenomena; and thanks to the boundaries imposed by framing, it fragmented reality into horizontal chunks of space. Particular uses of the medium could further wedge filmic representation and reality apart. Arnheim championed the use of surrealististic *mise-en-scène* in *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920); the oblique figure positions and canted angles of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (Carl Dreyer, 1928); and the drastically reconfigured spatio-temporal reality of the Soviet montageists. In all such ways, early cinema transfigured and manipulated the phenomenal world – as such, some classical theorists argued, it satisfied certain artistic criteria standardly applied to the traditional arts.

Like some other formative theorists, Arnheim prized cinema’s limitations, and this position led him to inveigh against recent technological innovations (most notably, synchronized sound, colour, widescreen, and 3-D). For Arnheim, such advancements were debasing attempts to compensate for the medium’s limitations, and they lured cinema away from its ontological essence (which for Arnheim lay in the medium’s pictorial dimension). From a contemporary standpoint, so much clinging to prototypical parameters betrays a technological conservatism, but Arnheim’s respect for the medium’s limitations was central to his defence of film as a distinctive artform. Colour would pull film closer to other traditions, such as painting and dance. Synchronized sound would result in ‘canned theatre’, transposing dialogue and sonic effects from the stage. Both technologies, moreover, would reduce the defamiliarizing capacity that was so central to Arnheim’s defence of film as art.

The resistance to these innovations was not unanimous among classical film theorists – Eisenstein, for instance, was generally receptive to the prospect of film sound and colour – but other aspects of Arnheim’s
approach resonated among his contemporaries and predecessors. Anticipating Arneim, Hugo Münterberg cautions that ‘the limitations of an art are in reality its strength and to overstep its boundaries means to weaken it’ (Münsterberg 1970: 89). And more generally, Arneim’s essentialism – his concern to articulate a specificity of film – typified the ontological thrust of much film theory during the first few decades of cinema’s existence.

The attempt to demonstrate film’s propensity for art persisted after the Second World War, but post-war film theory developed lines of argument that wholly contradicted the premises set forth by Arneim. Foremost here is André Bazin, for whom the value of cinema lies in its indexical relation to a photographed reality. Crucially, Bazin shuffled the criteria by which film had theretofore been appraised as an artform. If Arneim sought to show that film could be artistic despite its photographic element, Bazin simply rejected the assumption that photography was incongruous with art. Indeed, for Bazin, the essence of film art was to be found precisely in the medium’s photographic dimension. Cinema possessed a peculiar ability not shared by other art forms – it could transcribe reality – and thanks to Bazin, Kracauer, and other post-war theorists, cinematic realism became a new aesthetic standard.

Bazin’s tenets were sharply different from the emphases found in Arneim. While Arneim belittled film’s photographic essence, Bazin extolled it for its ability to ‘lay bare the realities’ (Bazin 1967: 15). Film art stemmed from a transformation of reality or it sprang from a ‘resurrection’ of the world. Arneim admired the deranged reality of German Expressionism; Bazin’s tastes favoured the everyday textures of neorealism. No less than Arneim, however, Bazin fostered an essentialist account of the medium. For Arneim, cinema was essentially a pictorial medium, while the Soviet theorists took film’s essence to consist in editing, or montage. For Bazin, by contrast, the ontology of film inhere in a capacity to inscribe a trace of the photographed reality, delivering the world in its full complexity and ambiguity. It was precisely this direct ontological link between object and image that, for Bazin, afforded cinema its highest possibility of achieving the distinction of art.

Bazin’s conviction that film art stems from an essential realism led him to affirm certain uses of film style and denigrate others. He celebrated in particular those devices which preserved spatio-temporal continuity, the better to faithfully evoke real-world experience. Spatial and temporal continuity could find expression in such compositional devices as deep focus, staging in depth, mobile camerawork, and long takes – all features that Bazin admired in the work of Welles, Wyler, Renoir, Rossellini, and Murnau. Devices such as deep focus were esteemed for generating ambiguity – as they would in reality, viewers had to scan a visual array in order to discover items of significance. Pledged to continuity techniques, Bazin manifested a general aversion to montage. He was not – as is sometimes alleged – wholly opposed to découpage, but nonetheless he favoured other styles. Bazin devalued devices, such as montage, that did not accord with his conception of cinematic realism. Not only did montage rupture continuity with choppy cuts and splices, it also disambiguated and thus diminished the world, by explicitly directing the spectator’s gaze to salient information. As such, montage could hardly succeed as a realist device – and thus it must be deemed extraneous to cinema’s expression as art.

The film theory that emerged in the 1960s – the point at which this book begins – signalled a transition in the field’s projects and concerns. No longer was the theorist embarked on a campaign to legitimate the medium. The auteur theory had helped lend credibility to the cinema, while the medium itself had yielded several accepted masterworks. Cinema’s acceptance as an artform equal to that of the traditional arts had been more or less consolidated. Now theorists shifted their sights to analysing cinema as a system of social and symbolic meaning. This enterprise, and the various theoretical approaches that ensued in its wake, form the object of this book. However, the theories discussed in the chapters that follow are in no sense estranged from the early and classical traditions of film theory. Contemporary film theory frequently discloses its indebtedness to the discoveries of early and classical thinkers. Bazin’s ontological inquiry connects with the writings of V. F. Perkins and Stanley Cavell. Eisenstein’s politically-oriented theory was ripe for uptake by Althusserian-Marxists in the 1970s. Münsterberg’s early sketch of the text – spectator interface looks ahead to the late 1980s cognitive turn. Sometimes an early or classical theorist informs several distinct contemporary approaches at once. Film theory after 1960 signalled a shift, not an absolute break, from foregoing approaches to film. And moreover, many contemporary theorists adverted to the general theoretical questions that compelled earlier thinkers like Arneim, Bazin, and Eisenstein. What is cinema? How do films construct meaning? What functions should cinema perform? We shall see throughout this book the different ways that contemporary theorists have broached these questions.

Using this book

What is Film Theory? is designed to survey and explicate the major debates within film theory since 1960. Chieflly, it aims to familiarize readers with the breathtaking diversity of approaches that has characterized the field since then. Film theory houses a range of theoretical positions, but it is also an explicitly discursive field of study. Theories do not spring
from nothingness. They are agitated into being by pre-existing, inferior propositions; they hark back to archaic, forgotten hypotheses; they open dialogue with cognate theories which they serve to complement, finesse, or qualify. A contemporary film theory is characteristically reactive – in the process of defining fresh premises, it revises, extends, or overthrows established ones. This book tries to convey such dynamic interplay by charting the evolution of contemporary film theory. Chapters are organized chronologically, alighting on major frameworks as they emerge at successive or simultaneous moments in history.

Each chapter provides a detailed exegesis of some major tradition within film theory. Many of the theories we foreground have spawned fertile discussion, but it would be neither fruitful nor feasible to canvass every text pertaining to the theory at hand. Every tradition has its exemplars – we limit ourselves primarily to discussion of these important archetypes. Accordingly, each chapter identifies major works and figures; it delineates conceptual frameworks; and it summarizes and synthesizes key arguments, occasionally coming to rest on particular case examples. Exemplary works are made salient throughout, and readers are encouraged to seek out these primary texts – all of which helped crystalize film theory in the contemporary period.

The book goes beyond simple exegesis. It furnishes original film analyses as well, exemplifying key theoretical strands through an examination of particular films. Not all works of film theory concern themselves with the individual film—a theory of cinema need only advance general propositions about the medium it studies. But the strength of a theory lies in its degree of testability against concrete examples. The analyses we present aim to demonstrate how particular theoretical approaches can illuminate individual films.

By what rationale have we chosen our film examples? Sometimes we have selected what we take to be a prototypical case study within a particular strand of theory—for instance, Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005) as a focal point of debate within queer theory, or Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989) as a touchstone of theories surrounding racial otherness. On other occasions we have opted for lesser known, more idiosyncratic examples. An abiding objective has been to address films of different genres, milieus, and epochs, the better to demonstrate the suppleness and utility of general theories of cinema. Although we have sought, as well, to encompass films from within and without the canon, we have sacrificed reference to a large number of films in favour of a few compelling examples. By analysing closely a limited range of fiction and nonfiction films, we aim to bring into sharper focus the virtues of contemporary theory's diverse methods and approaches.

Foregrounding the ongoing conversation among contemporary film theorists is a central concern of What is Film Theory? Given the field's dynamic interchange of ideas, it shouldn't surprise the reader to find certain theoretical concepts resurfacing throughout the book. Some concepts blaze across several distinct research programmes. Critics migrating from semiotics to psychoanalysis, for instance, carried practices, precepts, and suppositions with them. Cinema's structures of 'identification' compelled psychoanalytic theorists and cognitivists alike. Anti-traditional storytelling caught the attention of both Marxist and postmodern. And as we noted, a broader set of macro-questions have guided the theorist's inquiries, cutting across different theoretical traditions. Although we trace such connections throughout this book, each chapter can function as a stand-alone overview of a particular theoretical approach. This has been made so in order to facilitate classroom study, as well as to acknowledge the particularized interests of scholars and general readers alike. Thus the reader concerned only with screen theory will find a more or less autonomous account of the subject in the pertinent chapter. For readers interested in the broader canvas of contemporary film theory, the book as a whole will serve as a thoroughgoing, wide-ranging, and analytical introduction.

Finally, film theorists work with specialized terminology, and sometimes the terms they employ can be opaque. For this reason, we have supplied a glossary of terms at the end of each chapter. The glossary words are indicated in bold on their first occurrence.