

Writing about Film

THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING ABOUT FILM

What's so hard about writing about film? After all, we all "know" movies. Most of us could recite the plot of *Independence Day* with greater ease than we could recite the Declaration of Independence. We know more about the characters who perished on Cameron's *Titanic* than we know about many of the people who inhabit our own lives.

But it's precisely our familiarity with film that presents us with our greatest writing challenge. Film is so familiar and so prevalent in our lives that we are often lulled into passive viewing (at worst) or into simple entertainment (at best). As a result, certain aspects of a film are often "invisible." Caught up in the entertainment, we sometimes don't "see" the camera work, composition, editing, lighting, and sound. Nor do we "see" the production struggles that accompany every film - including the script's many rewrites, the drama of getting the project financed, the casting challenges, and so on.

However, when your film professors ask you to write about film, it's precisely those "invisible" aspects that they want you to see. Pay attention to the way the camera moves. Note the composition (the light, shadow, and arrangement of things) within the frame. Think about how the film was edited. In short, consider the elements that make up the film. How do they function, separately and together? Also think about the film in the context when it was made, how, and by whom. In breaking down the film into its constituent parts, you'll be able to *analyze* what you see.

As you analyze and write about film, remember that you aren't writing a review. Reviews are generally subjective: they explore an individual's response to a film and so do not require research, analysis, and so on. As a result, reviews are often both simplistic (thumbs up, thumbs down) and "clever" (employing the pun-driven or sensational turns of phrase of popular magazines). While reviews can be useful and even entertaining pieces of prose, they generally don't qualify as "academic writing."

We aren't saying that your individual and subjective responses to a film are useless. In fact, they can be most informative. Being terrified when you watch *The Blair Witch Project* can be the first step on the way to a strong analysis. Interrogate your terror. Why are you scared? What elements of the film contribute to your terror? How does the film play with the horror and documentary genres in order to evoke a fear that is fresh and convincing? And so on.

Formal Analysis

A formal analysis of a film or films requires that the viewer breaks the film down into its component parts and discusses how those parts contribute to the whole. Formal analysis can be understood as taking apart a tractor in a field: you lay out the parts, try to understand the function and purpose of each one, and then put the parts back together.

In order to do a convincing formal analysis, you'll need to be familiar with certain key terms. Returning to the tractor

analogy: it's helpful to be able to understand and to use terms like "carburetor" when you take a tractor apart - especially if you hope to explain your process to an onlooker.

CONSTRUCTING AN INFORMED ARGUMENT

What You Know

When you sit down to write an academic paper, you'll first want to consider what you know about your topic. Different writing assignments require different degrees of knowing. A short paper written in response to a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, for example, may not require you to be familiar with Hitchcock's other works. It may not even require you to have mastered the terms important to film criticism - though clearly any knowledge you bring to the film might help you to make a thoughtful response to it.

However, if you are asked to write an academic paper on the film, then you will want to know more. You will want to have certain terms in hand so that you can explain what Hitchcock is doing in key moments. You will want to be familiar with Hitchcock's other films so that you can understand what themes are important to him and his work. Moreover, if you are watching this film in an upper-level film class, you will want to be aware of different critical perspectives on Hitchcock's films and on films in general, so that you can "place" your argument within the larger ongoing conversation.

When you sit down to write an academic paper, ask yourself these questions:

What do I know about my topic?

- Can I answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, how?
- What do I know about the context of my topic?
- What historical or cultural influences do I know about that might be important to my topic?
- Does my topic belong to any particular genre or category of topics?
- What do I know about this genre?

What seems important to me about this topic?

- If I were to summarize what I know about this topic, what points would I focus on?
- What points seem less important?
- Why do I think so?

How does this topic relate to other things that I know?

- What do I know about the topic that might help my reader to understand it in new ways?

What DON'T I know about my topic?

- What do I need to know?
- How can I find out more?

What You Think

You'll discover as you consider the questions listed above that you are moving beyond what you *know* about a topic and are beginning to consider what you *think*. In the process of really thinking about your topic, your aim is to come up with a fresh observation. After all, it's not enough to summarize in a paper

what is already known and talked about. You must also add something of your own to the conversation.

Understand, however, that "adding something of your own" is not an invitation simply to bring your own personal associations, reactions, or experiences to the reading of a text. To create an informed argument, you must first recognize that your writing should be *analytical* rather than *personal*. In other words, your writing must show that your associations, reactions, and experiences of a text have been framed in a critical, rather than a personal, way.

How does one move from personal response to analytical writing?

Summarize.

First, summarize what the primary text is saying. You'll notice that you can construct several different summaries, depending on your agenda. Returning to the example of Hitchcock's film, you might make a plot summary, a summary of its themes, a summary of its editing, and so on. You can also summarize what you know about the film in context. In other words, you might write a summary of the difficulties Hitchcock experienced in the film's production, or you might write a summary of how this particular movie complements or challenges other films in the Hitchcock canon. You can also summarize what others have said about the film. Film critics have written much about Hitchcock, his films, and their genre. Try to summarize all that you know.

Evaluate.

The process of evaluation is an ongoing one. You evaluate a text the moment you encounter it, and - if you aren't lazy - you continue to evaluate and to re-evaluate as you go along. Evaluating a text is different from simply reacting to a text. When you evaluate for an academic purpose, it is important to be able to clearly articulate and to support your own personal response. What in the text is leading you to respond a certain way? What's *not* in the text that might be contributing to your response? Watching Hitchcock's film, you are likely to have found yourself feeling anxious, caught up in the film's suspense. What in the film is making you feel this way? The editing? The acting? Can you point to a moment in the film that is particularly successful in creating suspense? In asking these questions, you are straddling two intellectual processes: experiencing your own personal response, and analyzing the text.

Analyze.

This step in constructing an informed argument asks you first to consider the parts of your topic and then to examine how these parts relate to each other or to the whole. To analyze Hitchcock's film, you may want to break the film down by examining particular scenes, point of view, camera movements, and so on. In short, you'll want to ask: What are the components of Hitchcock's film, and how do these components contribute to the film's theme? How do they contribute to Hitchcock's work as a whole? When you analyze, you break the whole into parts so that you might see the whole differently. In the process of analysis, you find things that you might say.

Synthesize.

When you analyze, you break down a text into its parts. When you synthesize, you look for *connections* between ideas. Consider once again the Hitchcock film. In analyzing this film, you might come up with elements that seem initially disparate. You may have some observations that at first don't seem to gel. Or you may have read various critical perspectives on the film, all of them in disagreement with one another. Now would be the time to consider whether these disparate elements or observations might be reconciled, or synthesized. This intellectual exercise requires that you create an umbrella argument - some larger argument under which several observations and perspectives might stand.

WRITING TIPS

In many ways, writing a paper about film is no different from writing other kinds of papers in the Humanities. You need to focus your topic, write a good thesis sentence, settle on a structure, write clear and coherent paragraphs, and tend to matters of grammar and style.

In some other ways, however, writing a paper about film has some challenges of its own. We've collected a few tips here:

- *Don't simply summarize the film.*
Your professors have seen the film; you don't need to recount the plot to them. They are looking for analysis, not summary.
- *Don't simply summarize the use of camera angles or editing techniques.*
You've annotated shot sequences in order to find something to say about them. Don't simply transcribe your annotation and call it a paper. Rather, posit something about what the director is trying to achieve, or the effect that this shot sequence has upon the audience.
- *Don't limit yourself to a discussion of plot and characters.*
Some students come to film criticism trying to employ the techniques they've used to analyze novels in their English classes. They focus on analyzing the characters, themes, and plot. Film Studies papers focus on different elements of composition, as discussed above.
- *Avoid the "I."*
It's too easy to slip into a subjective "reviewer's" stance when you use the "I" in your criticism. Try to find a more objective way of beginning your sentences than "I found" or "I feel."