



# The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

**DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS**

## **How to Write About Film: The Movie Review, The Theoretical Essay, and The Critical Essay**

Unlike written texts you examine in your classes, film analysis allows you become lost in the narrative, to abandon your critical thinking skills. The darkness of the theater, the merging of sound, movement, and story all facilitate complete immersion. In what follows, we will examine strategies to keep your critical thinking active in the dark using Timothy Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. In this key book, he identifies **three** major genres of film writing (pp. 9-15) and **six** dominant ways to analyze film (pp. 87-101).

### **The Movie Review**

One of the most popular forms of film analysis, movie reviews often appear in newspapers and are tailored for the widest possible audiences to recommend or discourage the viewing of a film. This form is rare in academic writing.

### **The Critical Essay**

This form presumes the reader has seen/is familiar with the film(s) under discussion. The writer provides key details and themes but **does not go into lengthy summary**, keeping the focus of the analysis on a sequence or scene that may have escaped viewers on the first or second viewing. This analysis can focus on one or be a mix of the following:

#### **1) Formalism**

- Looks specifically at matters of structure and style
- Often combined with one or more of the other approaches
- Strict formal analysis only looks at what happens on screen, ignoring all outside factors, such as the biography of the director, the historical context, etc.
- Ask yourself:
  - What is most interesting and significant about the formal features and how do they add to the story and themes?
  - Looking at a particular scene or sequence, how is the lighting, sound, editing, or cinematography contributing to or impacting the meaning of the film? **Refer to our handout "Formal Elements of Film" for a list of qualities to consider.**

#### **2) Genre**

- Looks at the common patterns of form (lighting, editing, cinematography, mise-en-scène, etc.) and content (narrative, characterization, themes, etc.) to determine *how a film conforms or diverges from a genre category*
- Keep in mind the film's historical moment; genre changes over time
- Ask yourself:

- What common structures, themes, and techniques are associated with a particular genre?
- When did this genre first appear and why?
- Does it conform to expectations? If not, why?

### 3) Historical

- One of the most common modes
- Situates and investigates the unique historical moment of the content of the film and/or its production/release
- Ask yourself:
  - Am I concerned with how historical events are depicted in this film?
  - Does knowing the historical background help explain the narrative or technique?
  - Will my argument clarify the film's place in history? Some examples include:
    - Researching the effects of film technology's evolution (i.e., the rise of Technicolor)
    - Comparing the subject matter of certain films to their unique historical moment (i.e., film noir's dark narratives are the result of WWI and WWII anxieties)
    - Documenting the reception of a film by a particular audience

### The Theoretical Essay

This form generally requires the writer to have a good understanding of film history, film theory, or film technicalities. Typically, these essays explain some of the larger and more complex structures of the cinema and how we understand them. Analysis can focus on one or be a mix of the following:

### 4) National Cinema

- Looks at a film by taking into account each country's unique way of portraying the world, exploring the cultural conditions that produce these effects
- Ask yourself:
  - What exactly distinguishes these films from the American films you are used to?
  - How do meanings change when a film is seen outside of its culture?
  - What kind of cultural research might lead you to a deeper understanding of the themes?

### 5) Auteur

- One of the most pervasive theoretical forms
- Looks at how directors or other dominant figures, such as producers or actors, use pervasive themes and/or styles in their body of work
- Remember: rarely does a director have total control, and the term *auteur* has changed over time. For example, the *auteur* theory of the 1960s applied to the work of Alfred Hitchcock differs drastically from the theory now applied to that of David Lynch.
- Ask yourself:

- How do the historical conditions of the film's production encourage or discourage the unity of the auteur's work?
- What are the most distinctive indicators of the auteur's control over the film?

## 6) Ideology

- Another way of saying "politics"
- Think about the underlying message the film is conveying about society, culture, gender, etc.
- This category can be further broken down into these schools of thought:
  - Hollywood Hegemony: how classical film formulas dominate and distort ways of seeing the world
  - Feminist Studies: how women have been positively or negatively represented both in front of and behind the camera
  - Race Studies: how different races have been positively or negatively represented in front of and behind the camera
  - Class Studies: how social and economic arrangements surrounding and represented in film reflect and influence the distribution of social power
  - Postcolonial Studies: from a global perspective, how the repression and subsequent reemergence of indigenous cultures is revealed through and represented in film
  - Queer Theory: how normative gender relations can be challenged or disrupted through film

These six approaches for the critical essay rarely appear in seclusion. Often writers mix them. For example, one could consider Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) from an *auteurist* perspective, analyzing how it does or doesn't conform with the rest of Hitchcock's oeuvre; then examine the film's recurring formalist elements that contribute to the psychological vertigo of the principal character; and finally hypothesize about how the historical context of the Cold War era influences the film's content.