Writing About Film

Academic writing about film requires that you see beyond your enjoyment of the film experience and consider the “invisible things,” such as camera angles, composition and editing, lighting, sound and *mise-en-scene* (sets, costumes, makeup). These are the “film elements” that are distinctive to this art form. When we are caught up in the excitement or emotion of the film’s story, we often become passive viewers, swept along in the entertainment. Of course, these responses are important, but they are just a beginning point when it comes to writing thoughtfully about film.

Critical Analysis of Film (essay) vs. Film Review

The film essay engages with ideas about a film, not just our likes and dislikes, which is what distinguishes it from a film review.

A film review: tends to focus on the surface story, providing a lengthy description of the plot; perhaps the thrill of some aspects of the film, such as the special effects, or movie’s context (eg: the director’s other work), make it easier to understand. A review typically makes recommendations about whether the film is worth watching, so it is highly subjective and rather simplistic. It does not meet the standards of academic writing. However, the strong subjective responses to a film that shape a film review can become the basis for a powerful critical analysis.

*For example:* Why was *Memento* (2000) so compelling? What aspects of the framing and actors’ performances contributed to the intense and engaging mystery at the heart of the film? How did the film’s construction affect your emotional response and subvert the traditional detective genre?

A critical analysis of a film involves research, critical thinking and analysis, and may just as well be about a movie you disliked, as one that you really enjoyed. It avoids a lengthy reprise of the plot except where it is necessary to remind the reader of important themes or elements. The film essay supports a clearly articulated argument (your thesis) by looking closely at some feature of the film and will often situate the work in the context of other critical writing about the film. It may examine various aspects of the film’s elements as well as consider the film’s production history and context, the film’s reception and consumption by audiences, or issues of the film’s distribution (where/how it was made available for audiences to see).

*For example:* The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), a sweeping saga adapted from the book series, offers many possibilities for analysis:

- a text that may “mean” this or that
- a case study of book-to-film adaptations
- an example of the fantasy genre and the fandom associated with it
- a study of the world-wide distribution to international film audiences of an internationally funded film production
- an exploration of how these films affected the New Zealand economy
- an investigation into the artistic or cultural significance of the technical accomplishments required to make full-sized actors appear to be small-sized hobbits

Many other possibilities exist, but all of these topics would require critical thinking and analysis, along with research into various aspects of the film’s production, distribution or consumption.

Things to Consider as You Prepare to Write

A. Become familiar with film as a medium of expression. Review the list of film terms that you can find on some of these websites so that you develop some understanding of how a film is put together:

Revised October 2014
Each part of a film is there because someone made a decision to include it. As you watch your chosen film, try and become conscious of these deliberate decisions: how is a scene framed? When does a scene end with a dissolve or a fade? Are there ellipses in the narrative? How do aspects of the set design contribute to the tone and style of the film? Does the lighting or color palette of the film establish a particular mood? Attempt to view the film bearing in mind camera angle and shot type, lighting, editing, writing, and acting. How do these elements contribute to how you understand or enjoy the film?

B. **Start by clarifying your thesis:** What claim will you be making about how something functions in the film; the film’s interpretations; its effects on audiences; its place in or interaction with the spirit of the times; or, whatever other point of interest about the film that you have decided is worth investigating?

C. **Conduct a segmentation of the film:** This is a form of documenting the sequence of scenes in a film, so that you can track both the development of the story, but also the way in which this narrative is put together. How does the film move between comparative or competing storylines and characters? Whose point-of-view are viewers shown and when and how does this change? Does the film have a disrupted timeline, where the story jumps back in time, or flashes forward? Does it begin in one country and move to another only to return again to the first? This documentation process allows you to keep track of these things.

D. **If you are writing about particular scenes, conduct a shot-by-shot analysis.** This annotation allows you to deconstruct how the director builds a scene to create a certain mood, meaning, character development or style. For example: A scene may open with an aerial location shot, followed by an establishing shot of a building exterior. This is followed by a tracking shot across a domestic interior, passing several rooms to settle on a medium shot of 2 children playing on the floor in one of the rooms. Next, there is a medium close-up of the children, followed by another medium close-up of an adult who presumably is watching them, because we then see the reverse medium shot of the kids as they look up and see that they are being watched by their parent. [This passage describes a scene in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012)].

E. **Seek out other critical writing on your film.** This means, first of all: Don’t rely on the internet as the source of your research!! A full list of databases that index academic writing about films may be found by going to the Library Home Page and clicking on the “Search Collection” tab and then “Databases by Subject or Name.” Browse by subject until you find “Film.” Some of the most helpful resources include:

- Film and Television Literature Index with Full Text
- Academic Search Complete
- Communication and Mass Media Complete
- Internet Movie Database

If your topic intersects with other disciplines, it is also worthwhile to check databases associated with those fields of study. You may also find it useful to talk to your subject librarian about other
sources - this person can be found by going to the Get Help tab, click subject librarian, and then selecting your subject area.

Because movies are part of popular culture, as well as the subject of academic study, you may also find it helpful to look at some popular reviews to gain an understanding of how the film is being understood and received by a wider audience. Some respected North American sources of such reviews may be found at The Globe and Mail, Maclean’s Magazine, The New York Times, The New Yorker Magazine, The Los Angeles Times, The San Francisco Chronicle, or The Village Voice.

F. Examine your assumptions
No matter what approach you employ as you write your film essay, wherever possible interrogate your own underlying assumptions. Assuming, for example, that a film reveals an unmediated picture of a given time, place or event – even a documentary – misses that it is told from a particular point of view, and may reflect prevailing beliefs or be shaped by economic concerns that are not immediately apparent. What tacit background information are you using to introduce or assess an aspect of your chosen film?

For example: Does your affection for or dislike of a given genre or a particular director predispose you to a viewpoint that impedes or aids your critical analysis of the film? For instance, how does the fact that you love Danny Boyle’s early film Trainspotting (1996) shape your understanding and approach to his work Slumdog Millionaire (2008)? If you usually dislike science fiction movies, does this get in the way of enjoying the philosophical aspects of The Matrix (1999).

G. Consider the context
Seeing other films by the director of your chosen film can give you insight into the issues, styles or genres that interest him or her. How does this film engage these concerns, or take up new ones? Sometimes the production conditions of the film significantly impact the final version that gets released to the public Consider if these factors may be helpful to developing your paper: Where did the financing come from and what conditions were attached? Who determined the casting? How many screenwriters came and went through the development of the film?

Possible Approaches to Writing about Film
Given the rich complexity of film as art, as a cultural product, and as a tool of social commentary there are a variety of scholarly approaches you can take to writing a film essay:

NOTE: Both 1 and 2 are examples of a formal analysis, where you examine in detail a formal aspect of the film. How do the parts of the film contribute to the whole? Look for patterns in the structure or style of the film.

1. Analyze how a detail works in the film. What role does it serve? How does it operate in the film? This might be such things as a particular color or another aspect of the mise-en-scene; a sequence of shots or other distinctive feature of the editing; or, a recurring object or motif.

Some examples: The color filters used in Steven Soderbergh’s Traffic (2000)
The highly idiosyncratic slang in the Coen Brothers’ Miller’s Crossing (1990)
The red jacket in Steven Speilberg’s Schindler’s List (1993)

2. Consider the narrative form: How is this film put together?
For example: Is the film a piece of classic cinema in the great Hollywood tradition, such as *Casablanca* (1942), or is it an example of a more fragmented postmodern text, like *Pulp Fiction* (1994)? A variant on this essay involves conducting a careful analysis of one or two scenes in a film, exploring how stylistic aspects and/or themes are developed through these segments of the film. Discuss how these scenes relate to the film as a whole; how they may undermine or reiterate larger themes, intentions or elements of the film.

NOTE: Both 3 and 4 are examples of essays that take an ideological approach to film analysis.

3. Does the film reflect or examine a current cultural theme?

Much scholarly work exists on films as cultural products, since these texts reflect contemporary values, beliefs, events or memes and therefore provide great opportunities to develop understanding of a particular perspective or trend. How does the film you wish to write about present or accomplish this end? As you watch it, pay attention to how it approaches this through characters and casting, narrative, style or genre.

For example: How does the notion of celebrity circulate in the trilogy of *Bourne* films (2002-2007), where Matt Damon is the centerpiece of each movie? Since he was already a well-established movie star, they may be viewed as a means to further his star power, at the same time as they bring to this movie series a certain weight, given that Damon is also known for playing roles in independent art films. How might this shape viewers’ understanding of him as an action hero? With the lead transferring to Jeremy Renner in the newest, fourth film in this film franchise, how will the celebrity mantle now operate in the series, with a new star on the rise?

4. Does the film present a particular political or theoretical viewpoint? Develop an argument based on examining how the film reflects a given framework. (Eg: post-modern, conservative, progressive, feminist, post-colonial). Does it position itself like this intentionally, or are you choosing to read against the grain by conducting an analysis that undermines the apparent ‘intended’ understandings of the film? You may consider point-of-view, casting, narrative arc, mise-en-scene or other aspects of the film’s style.

For example: What does *The Messenger* (2009) suggest about America’s participation in the Iran/Iraq War? How does *Thelma and Louise* (1991) reflect a feminist understanding of women’s experiences? Remember that even films that don’t foreground a political or philosophical position, still reflect particular values or beliefs.

Consider:
*The Wizard of Oz* (1939) calls for endurance in the face of unexpected loss, even though it is also a colorful musical.

The *X-Men* films (2000-2011), fantasy action adventure movies, also point to a view of government that suggests all bureaucracies tend toward totalitarianism.

*Babel* (2006) implies that the world is a complex multinational interconnected web of cause and effect, at the same time that it is also a close look at several different family relationships.

NOTE: 5, 6 and 7 are all approaches to film analysis that begin with considering the overall character of the film.

5. Auteur approach: While films are clearly the product of a wide variety of contributors (just look at the long list of credits at the end of any film!) this view of films see them as the artistic output of the director’s (or sometimes the producer’s) artistic vision. These directors have been able to maintain a sufficient degree of autonomy from studio, financial or other influences so that their body of work does offer a distinctive aesthetic style or thematic focus, which is analyzed in this type of essay. This essay will require seeing at least a couple of films by your chosen director so
that you can critically analyze elements and/or themes of his or her style. It also helps to bear in mind that the historical time, place and context of production may shape what the auteur is able to do or is interested in creating. To get started, ask yourself what aspect of the film is most representative of the filmmaker’s control over the work.

**For example:** have you noticed something distinctive about the:

- **Settings and mise-en-scene** in Terry Gilliam’s films (*Brazil; The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*);
- **Music** in Quentin Tarantino’s films (*Reservoir Dogs; Pulp Fiction; Kill Bill Vol 1 & 2, Django Unchained*);
- **Themes of embodiment** in David Cronenberg’s oeuvre (*A History of Violence; Crash; The Fly*);
- **Use of special effects** in Ang Lee’s work (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; The Hulk; Life of Pi*);
- **Editing** in the films of Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho; Vertigo; The Birds*);
- **A troubled view of relationships** in Atom Agoyan’s films (*Exotica, Adoration, Chloë*);
- **An interest in obsessive personalities** in Paul Thomas Anderson’s work (*Magnolia; There Will be Blood, The Master*).

This sense of similarity is what spurs an interest in auteur analysis. However, try to maintain some skepticism as the look and feel of a film will also be shaped by the participation of others such as the screenwriter; the editor; the director of photography; the set, costume and makeup designers; and even the financiers/studio executives.

6. **Consider the film’s genre** and how this work exemplifies or challenges generic expectations. Films can typically be classified as fitting into one or a combination of genres. Some examples of film genres are film noir, romantic comedies, thrillers or horror films. This essay involves understanding the constituents of the genre (particular plot patterns, editing styles, emotional effects, character types or iconography) and works well if you focus on particular scenes as a means of unpacking these elements. You may want to consider how the genre affects larger purposes of the film or how the genre shapes audience reception.

**Examples** of such topics have included essays like this:

- A) ‘**Spaghetti westerns**’ emerged in the early 1960s as a subgenre of the western. These movies were often shot in Italy and played on the forms and expectations of American westerns but combined this with a more European stylistic sensibility to create iconic films such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). What contemporary western films similarly subvert the genre conventions of the western?

- B) **Horror films** such as *Alien* (1979), *The Ring* (2002) or *Resident Evil* (2002) frequently include a female character who becomes the lone survivor of the deranged killer. How is this character’s role developed and what purposes does it serve in shaping the audience’s engagement with these films?

7. **Regional Cinema styles** are shaped by the cultural traditions and specific national histories of the countries from which they come. Hollywood films, for example, tend to favor the happy ending or at least a clear resolution, and emphasize the narrative over the characters. If you are mostly used to this type of movie, watching a French New Wave film that emphasizes the mood over the story, and offers an ambiguous ending may feel like a more challenging viewing experience. What do these differences have to say about national character; how do they reflect the cinematic or cultural trends of a country?

**For example:** Understanding something about the political and cultural history of China aids in appreciating the Chinese film *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). Appreciating that Bollywood films
(from India) often reflect a love of spectacle as well as a traditional view of gender roles will affect how you view *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) that blends a British text with an Indian location and treatment.

8: **Take an historical approach to your film:** This film essay has many possibilities as films both have histories and reflect history since they are created and exist in a given historical context. They may affect history by turning audiences’ attention to certain subjects or by shaping audience expectations in particular ways so that the films that follow them may be radically changed. This opens up opportunities to consider, at both a macro or a micro level, the conditions under which the film was produced: What is going on in world events or in the cultural terrain at the time this film was made? OR, what is going on with trends and factors in the world of film-making at the time of its production?

*For example:* *Casablanca* (1942) was made during World War Two, but also at a time when the big studios had considerable influence over which films were made and the way in which they were made. It reflects the continuity editing style of the time, but also mirrors the war-time terrain in its espionage story line; and, it appealed to audiences’ desire for the allies to make heroic sacrifices and be victorious. Consider how these multiple factors affected the style and reception of this film.

9. **Comparing 2 or more films:** This essay may take any of the above approaches as a framework and conduct a compare and contrast analysis across two or more films. Pick an element that interests you or a cultural theme that you wish to explore and find some films that exemplify this concern.

*For example:* Maybe you want to look at how a particular sound element (music, dialogue, sound effects) performs differently in two historical dramas or perhaps you are interested in how older women are depicted in recent British romantic comedies. No matter what your topic, remember to ground your analysis in a close look at particular scenes or moments in the films so that your analysis is deep and substantive.

**A Demonstration:**

Bordwell and Thompson (2008) suggest the following 4 steps to analyze a film’s style. Each step is followed by an example of how this might work, using a documentary film as the object of the analysis throughout. Imagine that these 4 steps, put together, are part of the introduction to a lengthy paper (these ideas would then be developed through the body of the paper). The steps address these types of concerns:

- What are the film elements?
- How are they presented?
- How will you go about proving your argument?

**Step 1: Determine the organizational structure**

*Radiant City* (2006) is a documentary film that plays with the documentary form by actively subverting the boundary between fact and fiction, with the aim of exploring the issues and concerns of urban sprawl. It is an example of an accomplished synthetic documentary style offering a vivid demonstration of “the creative treatment of actuality” (Kerrigan and McIntyre 112).
Step 2: Identify the salient techniques used

*Radiant City* combines interviews with authorities, with “apparently” narrative footage of a family story, along with interviews with these family members and other community members. As well, we see animated sequences detailing didactic information about the subject area.

Step 3: Trace out the patterns of techniques

*Radiant City* cleverly sets up a mockumentary style restaging in a manner that privileges a cinema verité reading by the viewer. Ostensibly structured as a family narrative, and drawing heavily on the use of handheld cameras and seemingly spontaneous, improvised performances, the viewer is led to believe that these are real people with real stories of living in the suburbs. Scenes of their desires and understandings are intercut with talking-head type interviews with genuine “experts” in the field. These various interviews, combined with facts and figures about urban life, set up a rhetorical structure that plays the average person’s lived experience off of the experts’ opinions.

Step 4: Propose functions for the salient techniques and the patterns they form (“style also shapes meaning”)

What initially begins as a somewhat paradoxical view of life in the “burbs” – given that the experts say one thing and the people another – evolves through the film as the lives of the participants are shown growing more troubled and complex, giving weight to the experts’ commentaries. The impact of juxtaposing these contradictory experiences and opinions is amplified when we learn towards the end of the film that the “family” is, in fact, a collection of actors who are performing these roles, but who themselves live in suburban neighborhoods. Are they “acting,” or are the concerns of urban sprawl “real” for them? Through this strategy, the divide between “artifice” and “reality” is complicated further, and the implied meanings made even more complex. Thus, the filmmakers use this synthetic rhetorical style, drawing on mockumentary, narrative and expert opinions, to creatively reinforce their troubled vision of cities with suburbs.

Citing Films

MLA, APA and Chicago style are the most common citation styles found in academic film journals. Note that all styles require *italicization* of titles in the narrative body of your text; however, there are differences in how each of these styles handles in-text citations and the citation in the list of references. Many journals just ask that you cite the film’s date with the first mention of the film. Also, if the film has a lengthy name, subsequent references may use a shortened form. Some ask for a filmography – a list of all films mentioned in the text – that is separate from your bibliography. Much of the information you will need for the citation can be found at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) or the Wikipedia page associated with the film (the studios often post this information). You can also gather the information directly from the film or DVD.

**APA Style**

APA lists films in the reference list alphabetically by producer’s surname (rather than the director’s), and performers are not noted. Note that sentence style is used for the film name, which means that only the first word is capitalized. The format is as follows:


For example

**In-text citation:**
(Producer Surname & Director Surname, Year)
Eg: (Albert, 1993); (Rudin, 2010)

**MLA Style**
Typically, films are listed in Works Cited by title. When the film has an original title in another language, this will follow the English title in square brackets. The director’s name follows the title, which is followed by any other people that you feel are significant (based on the content of your paper), such as the producers, screenwriters, and performers, although usually it is the only the director and key performers who are included. List the studio or distributor, the date and the publication medium. Note that the title is headline style - all major words are capitalized. The format is as follows:


For example

MLA style allows you to determine which information you want to lead with in the Works Cited list. This means that if you focussed on the role a certain individual played in the making of the film, you can index the film under this name (surname first), instead of the title, with a lower case descriptor following the name, which identifies their role (eg: dir., comp., writ., prod., adapt.). List the director after the name of the film and then any other key figures you wish to note. followed by the same information that is noted above.

For example
Almodovar, Pedro. dir. *All About My Mother [Todo Sobre Mi Madre]*. Perf. Penelope Cruz, Marisa Paredes and Cecilia Roth. Sony Pictures Classics. 1999. Film

For in-text citations, MLA recommends trying to include the director’s name in the narrative, rather than citing parenthetically, since these works are unpaginated (obviously!)
For example: “Spike Jonze’s Being John Malkovich is an amusing and complex take on intertextuality, in a cinematic form.”

Chicago Style
Provide any information necessary to identify the film: the film’s creator(s), city, studio or distributor, the date and the medium (eg: film or DVD). Listings are typically by film title, but if any auxiliary material is used such as commentary from a DVD, these are cited by author and then title, and treated like chapters (set off with quotation marks). Include a URL if the film is accessible only through an online site and an access date if no other publication information is available.

Title of Work. Directed by Firstname Lastname. Original Release Year. {This is only included if significantly different than video release date} City: Studio/Distributor, Video release year. Medium.

For example

Footnotes take this form (note that the punctuation and capitalization are different from above):

For example