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# WRITING ABOUT THE MOVIES

## WHY WRITE ABOUT THE MOVIES?

Commenting some years ago on his experience at the movies, the French writer Christian Metz described a challenge that still faces the student of movies today: We all understand the movies, but how do we explain them?

As a measure of that common understanding, notice the extent to which movies are a part of a cultural life that we generally take for granted. We all treasure and identify with certain movies—for their laughs, their thrills, or their haunting images of terror—and movies and their stars regularly become part of our daily lives and conversations. In 2004 Clint Eastwood's film about a paralyzed female boxer and her desire to die, *Million Dollar Baby*, provoked regular debates about euthanasia and the politics of film, and that same year, Mel Gibson's story of Christ's crucifixion, *The Passion of the Christ*, stirred heated discussions about the relationship of Christianity and anti-Semitism. In 1997 *Star Wars* lent its name to a controversial military project, and in 1991 *JFK* raised again unsettled questions about President John F. Kennedy's assassination that appeared on television and in newspapers for months before and after the movie's release. In a sense, Erwin Panofsky's 1934 words are probably truer today than ever before:

If all the serious lyrical poets, composers, painters and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would become aware of the fact and a still smaller fraction would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies, the social consequences would be catastrophic. (234)

Publicly and privately, our lives have become so permeated by the movies that we rarely bother to think carefully about them—and less often, if at all, do we think of writing about them.

Normally, we might argue that there is little reason to struggle to explain—and certainly not in writing—what we understand primarily as entertainment. Whether in a movie theater or watching late-night television, we usually watch films because we expect the kind of pleasure seldom associated with an inclination to pick up pen and paper. After seeing Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005), we might chat briefly about certain characters, music, or scenes we particularly enjoyed or disliked, but we rarely want to offer a lengthy analysis of how the sets, the construction of the story, and the characters worked together. There is often an unspoken assumption that any kind of analysis might interfere with our enjoyment of the movies.

We are less reluctant to think analytically about other forms of entertainment. If, for instance, we watch a dance performance or a basketball game, we may easily and happily discuss some of the intricacies and complexities of those performances, realizing that our commentary adds to, rather than subtracts from, our enjoyment of the event. At these times, our understanding of and pleasure in experiencing the event are products of the critical awareness that our discussion refines and elaborates on. The person who has no inclination or ability to reflect on or analyze basketball or dance may be entertained on some level, but the person who is able to activate a critical intelligence about the rules and possibilities involved experiences a more intricate kind of pleasure.

In fact, our ability to respond with some analytical awareness adds to our enjoyment. And not surprisingly, the same is true of our enjoyment of the movies. Informed audiences often turn to read a review of a show they have seen the night before; many of us enjoy reading about movies we have not even seen. Analytical thinking and reading about an “entertainment” invigorate and enrich it and, perhaps, make the event itself more entertaining. Analytical writing about film offers the same promises and rewards. For example, when pressured to explain carefully why, despite its disturbing story about racism in Los Angeles, she liked *Crash*, one student discovered that her understanding of and appreciation for the film were more complex and subtle than she had first realized. While there was no missing the prominent issues in the film, she began to think more about the title and the unusual structure of the film. She began her expanded response:

Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2004) is a rare, hard look at racism in America today. It moves across the multiracial landscape of Los Angeles, depicting the daily lives of African Americans, Latinos, Persian Americans, Caucasians, and Asian Americans: Some are upper-class suburbanites, others young professionals or struggling business owners, and still others

angry and disadvantaged kids on the street. What distinguishes the film, however, is not so much its presentation of well-known social and racial differences but how it investigates those differences through the powerful metaphoric significance of the title and through the coincidental overlappings of the many different stories within the film. In *Crash* racial anger becomes a consequence of the isolation of individuals within their self-contained worlds (like moving cars tightly locked and sealed). Despite this isolation, the movie shows the uncanny inevitability of these individuals continually crossing paths (like speeding cars on roads and highways) where their anger, more often than not, results in explosive conflicts. Out of these “crashes,” the movie suggests, there is the possibility of a redemption, for crashes do create contact and this contact with other individuals sometimes leads to compassion and understanding. As the police detective (Don Cheadle) says at the very start of the film, “We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.”

If the movies inform many parts of our lives, we should be able to enjoy them in many ways, including the challenging pleasure of trying to think about, explain, and write about our experience watching them. We go to the movies for many reasons: to think, or not to think; to stare at them; to write about them. We may go to a movie to consume it like cotton candy; we may go to a film where that candy becomes food for the mind. As the fan of *Crash* found out, analyzing our response to a movie does not ruin our enjoyment of it. Writing about a film can allow us to enjoy it (and other films) in ways we were incapable of before. If watching and understanding is one of the pleasures of the movies, writing and explaining can be another exciting pleasure.

Let us keep in mind that writing about the movies is not so far from what most of us do already: When we leave a movie theater after two hours of enforced silence, most of us discuss or argue about the film. Although the difference between talking and writing about a subject is a crucial one, writing about a film is, in one sense, simply a more refined and measured kind of communication, this time with a reader. Our comments can be about the performance of an actor, the excitement elicited by specific scenes, or just common questions about what happened, why it happened, or why the film made the answers to these questions unclear.

Frequently, these conversations evolve from searching for the right word or finding a satisfactory description of how a sequence develops: “I prefer Keaton to Chaplin because Keaton’s funnier. Well, I mean, he tells funnier, more complicated stories”; “I hated—no, I found much too

predictable—the ending of *Garden State* (2004).” While talking about movies, even very casually, we search for words to match what we saw and how we reacted to it. Writing about film is a careful and more calculated step beyond this first impulse to discuss what we have seen. Given this normal impulse, we can even enjoy talking and writing about a movie that we didn’t like. A friend of the writer who praised *Crash* thus begins his essay more negatively than the student quoted above:

*Crash* (2004) is a disturbing film because so few American films even attempt to approach the topic of racism. Regardless of its good intention, however, the movie never escapes a kind of melodramatic melancholy rooted in the sad and often desperate lives of wealthy white suburban men and women, ambitious African-American police officers, Persian entrepreneurs, and angry but conflicted street hustlers. Not only do few of these characters evince much psychological or intellectual complexity, but the reduction of racism to a drama of isolated individuals makes it impossible for *Crash* to address the larger economic and political forces underpinning racism in America. The ending is indicative: Releasing a group of defenseless Asian immigrants on the streets of New York may suggest that one star character (Ludacris) has tried to do the right thing, but it offers little constructive hope for the future of these nameless aliens.

As these two friends discovered, when we understand the same movie very differently, trying to explain that understanding can be charged with all the energy of a good conversation.

Perhaps more than most other arts and entertainments, the movies frequently elicit a strong emotional or intellectual reaction. Often, however, the reason for our particular reaction to a movie remains unclear until we have had the opportunity to think carefully about and articulate what stimulated it. *Meet John Doe* (1941) might elicit a giddy nostalgia ridiculously out of step with today’s political complexities; gay viewers of *The Crying Game* (1992) may find themselves attracted by the honest depiction of the characters’ suffering about sexual identity but may be uncomfortable with the background plot about the Irish Republican Army; most audiences of Fellini’s *8½* (1963) will probably recognize the importance of the opening sequence, in which a man floats from his car above a traffic jam, but they may be hard-pressed to explain quickly what it means in terms of the story that follows. Analyzing our reactions to themes, characters, or images like these can be a way not only of understanding a movie better but also of understanding better how we view the world and the cultures we live in. In the

following three paragraphs, we can see how Geoffrey Nowell-Smith turned his initial excitement about a scene in an Antonioni film into an exploration of that particular scene and, implicitly, into a discussion of his admiration of the human complexity in Antonioni’s films:

There is one brief scene in *L’Avventura*, not on the face of it a very important one, which seems to me to epitomize perfectly everything that is most valid and original about Antonioni’s form of cinema. It is the scene where Sandro and Claudia arrive by chance at a small village somewhere in the interior of Sicily. The village is strangely quiet. They walk around for a bit, call out. No reply, nothing. Gradually it dawns on them that the village is utterly deserted, uninhabited, perhaps never was inhabited. There is no one in the whole village but themselves, together and alone. Disturbed, they start to move away. For a moment the film hovers: the world is, so to speak, suspended for two seconds, perhaps more. Then suddenly the film plunges, and we cut to a close-up of Sandro and Claudia making love in a field—one of the most ecstatic moments in the history of the cinema, and one for which there has been apparently no formal preparation whatever. What exactly has happened?

It is not the case that Sandro and Claudia have suddenly fallen in love, or suddenly discovered at that moment that they have been in love all along. Nor, at the other extreme, is theirs a panic reaction to a sudden fear of desolation and loneliness. Nor again is it a question of the man profiting from a moment of helplessness on the part of the woman in order to seduce her. Each of these explanations contains an aspect of the truth, but the whole truth is more complicated and ultimately escapes analysis. What precisely happened in that moment the spectator will never know, and it is doubtful if the characters really know for themselves. Claudia knows that Sandro is interested in her. By coming with him to the village she has already more or less committed herself, but the actual fatal decision is neither hers nor his. It comes, when it comes, impulsively: and its immediate cause, the stimulus which provokes the response, is the feeling of emptiness and need created by the sight of the deserted village. Just as her feelings (and his too for that matter) are neither purely romantic nor purely physical, so her choice, Antonioni is saying, is neither purely determined nor purely free. She chooses, certainly, but the significance of her choice escapes her, and in a sense also she could hardly have acted otherwise. . . .

Where in this oppressive physical and social environment do the characters find any escape? How can they break out of the labyrinth which

nature and other men and their own sensibilities have built up around them? Properly speaking there is no escape, nor should there be. Man is doomed to living in the world—this is to say no more than that he is doomed to exist. But the situation is not hopeless. There are moments of happiness in the films, which come, when they come, from being at peace with the physical environment, or with others, not in withdrawing from them. Claudia in *L'Avventura*, on the yacht and then on the island, is cut off, mentally, from the other people there, and gives herself over to undiluted enjoyment of her physical surroundings, until with Anna's disappearance even these surroundings seem to turn against her and aggravate rather than alleviate her pain. In *The Eclipse* Vittoria's happiest moment is during that miraculous scene at Verona when her sudden contentment seems to be distilled out of the simple sights and sounds of the airport: sun, the wind in the grass, the drone of an aeroplane, a juke-box. At such moments other people are only a drag—and yet the need for them exists. The desire to get away from oneself, away from other people, and the satisfaction this gives, arise only from the practical necessity for most of the time of being aware of oneself and of forming casual or durable relationships with other people. And the relationships too can be a source of fulfillment. No single trite or abstract formulation can catch the living essence of Antonioni's version of the human comedy. (355, 363)

In this example, a single scene becomes the stimulus for the essay. The author probes and questions this scene: What exactly has happened, and what does it mean? His obvious satisfaction as a writer comes from analyzing this scene as if it were a mystery to be solved. In the process of his analysis, his original curiosity leads to broader readings of other Antonioni movies and, finally, to his discovery of a consolation in the disturbing predicament that first caught his eye. For this writer, the pleasure of following his curiosity led to the larger pleasure of understanding more about life and happiness in modern times.

## YOUR AUDIENCE AND THE AIMS OF FILM CRITICISM

Writing about film can serve one of several functions. It can help you to:

- Understand your own response to a movie better.
- Convince others why you like or dislike a film.
- Explain or introduce something about a movie, a filmmaker, or a group of movies that your readers may not know.

- Make comparisons and contrasts between one movie and others, as a way of understanding them better.
- Make connections between a movie and other areas of culture to illuminate both the culture and the movies it produces.

The purposes that become part of or central to your writing will sometimes depend entirely on your audience: An essay introducing a new movie, for example, is usually written for an audience that has not seen the film. However, even when that purpose is decided on independently—perhaps out of a personal interest in the relation between Spanish films and Spanish culture—what you say will always be shaped by your notion of your audience, and especially by what you presume those readers know or want to know.

If you think of writing as, in some ways, resembling conversation, you will see how the notion of an audience helps to shape what you say. If, for example, you are discussing an American movie, such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), with a non-American, both the way you make your point about the film and, perhaps, the point itself will be determined by what you believe that individual knows and wants to know about American culture and about the movie itself. (A non-American, for example, may need to be told what the city Nashville and its music mean to Americans, while an American will need very little explanation.) Similarly, in discussing a film with someone who may not have seen it, I would probably first describe that film with a general overview, summarizing the plot and themes as a way to convince that person to see the film or not to see it. If, on the other hand, I am talking about a movie that a friend and I have both seen several times, such as *Batman Begins* (2005), I do not have to remind that person of the plot or even of which actors played which parts. Just as our conversations about movies differ according to the individuals we are speaking with, the way we write about film, and even the critical position we choose, vary depending on the audience we are writing for.

One schematic and traditional way to indicate the different audiences a writer might envision is to distinguish between a screening report, a movie review, a theoretical essay, and a critical essay.

### The Screening Report

A screening report is a short piece of writing that acts as a preparation for class discussions and examinations. Primarily a descriptive assignment that organizes notes on a film (see pp. 22–35), the report should contain

about three or four paragraphs (about 1 to 2 pages) focused on two to four points related to the topics of the course or to specific questions provided by the instructor (your target audience for this kind of writing). Unlike a review or critical essay, a screening report avoids strong opinions or a particular argument. Instead, it aims to be as objective and concrete as possible, including audio and visual detail wherever possible. For a class on the road movie, one student begins his screening report of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) this way:

1. *Badlands* as Road Movie: Narrative. Characteristic of this genre is the journey away from home and onto an open road. Like other road movies, here there are no apparent goals, except flight, and the plot develops as a series of episodic events and encounters. After the murder of Holly's father, she and Kit almost randomly kill people they encounter on the road, as a kind of parody of the violence found in other road movies.

2. *Badlands* and the Road Movie: Compositions. The most obvious emblem of a road movie is the moving perspective of the car that carries Kit and Holly along the open roads of the west. The framing of numerous shots in this film call attention to the vast and empty spaces that surround the characters, but unlike more realistic road movies, the luminous images of *Badlands* often create surreal landscapes. The soundtrack is an unusual variation on the genre: Holly's voice-over narration makes the story seem like a cheap romantic novel, and the music ranges from the operatic to honky-tonk.

Since this is a first sketch of the report, more specific details must be added later. Precise description of several shots and scenes will then provide compelling support for discussions in class and for preparation for examinations.

## The Movie Review

The movie review is the type of film analysis with which most of us are chiefly familiar, since it appears in almost every newspaper. Normally, a review aims at the broadest possible audience, the general public with no special knowledge of film. Accordingly, its function is to introduce unknown films and to recommend or not recommend them. Because it presumes an audience has not seen the movie it discusses, much of the essay is devoted to summarizing the plot or placing the film in another context (the director's other work, films of the same genre, etc.) that might help the reader understand it. Here, Vincent

Canby's review introduces the readers of *The New York Times* to Malick's *Badlands* (1973):

In Terrence Malick's cool, sometimes brilliant, always ferociously American film, "Badlands," which marks Malick's debut as a director, Kit and Holly take an all-American joyride across the upper Middle West, at the end of which more than half a dozen people have been shot to death by Kit, usually at point blank range. "Badlands" is the first feature by Mr. Malick, a 29-year-old former Rhodes Scholar and philosophy student whose only other film credit is as the author of the screenplay for the nicely idiosyncratic "Pocket Money." "Badlands" was inspired by the short, bloody saga of Charles Starkweather who, at age 19, in January, 1958, with the apparent cooperation of his 14-year-old girlfriend, Carol Fugate, went off on a murder spree that resulted in 10 victims. Starkweather was later executed in the electric chair and Miss Fugate given life imprisonment.

"Badlands" inevitably invites comparisons with three other important American films—Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde" and Fritz Lang's "Fury" and "You Only Live Once"—but it has a very different vision of violence and death. Mr. Malick spends no great amount of time invoking Freud to explain the behavior of Kit and Holly, nor is there any Depression to be held ultimately responsible. Society is, if anything, benign. . . .

"Badlands" is narrated by Holly in the flat, nasal accents of the Middle West and in the syntax of a story in *True Romances*. "Little did I realize," she tells us at the beginning of the film, "that what began in the alleys and by-ways of this small town would end in the Badlands of Montana." At the end, after half a dozen murders, she resolves never again to "tag around with the hell-bent type."

Kit and Holly share with Bonnie and Clyde a fascination with their own press coverage, with their overnight fame ("The whole world was looking for us," says Holly, "for who knew where Kit would strike next?"), but a lack of passion differentiates them from the gaudy desperados of the thirties. Toward the end of their joyride, the bored Holly tells us she passed the time, as she sat in the front seat beside Kit, spelling out complete sentences with her tongue on the roof of her mouth.

Mr. Malick tries not to romanticize his killers, and he is successful except for one sequence in which Kit and Holly hide out in a tree house as elaborate as anything the MGM art department ever designed for Tarzan and Jane. Mr. Sheen and Miss Spacek are splendid as the self-absorbed, cruel, possibly psychotic children of our time, as are the members of the supporting cast, including Warren Oates as Holly's father.

One may legitimately debate the validity of Mr. Malick's vision, but not, I think, his immense talent. "Badlands" is a most important and exciting film. (40)

We can identify more than one function in this essay. Canby aims to convince his reader that *Badlands* is an important movie that is worth seeing, and he does this by introducing Malick and his credentials, by describing the plot and the historical background of that plot, by evaluating the acting, and by placing Malick's movie in the context of other films like it (specifically, *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967] and the two Fritz Lang movies). Equally important, however, is his clear sense of his audience: readers who probably know the popular *Bonnie and Clyde* but little about Malick and the background of *Badlands*. These are readers who have not yet seen the film and would like to know the outline of the story and a little about the characters and actors (Figure 1).

### The Theoretical Essay

The more theoretical essay—for instance, an essay on the relation of film and reality, on the political or ideological foundations of the movie industry, or on how film narrative is unlike literary narrative—is at the other



Figure 1 Like most films, *Badlands* (1973) provokes a variety of ways to think and write about it: screening reports, reviews, critical essays, and theoretical reflections.

end of the spectrum. Such an essay often supposes that the reader possesses a great deal of knowledge about specific films, film history, and other writings about film. Its target audience, often advanced students or people who teach film studies, is usually very knowledgeable about the movies. Its aim is to explain some of the larger and more complex structures of the cinema and how we understand them. Note the changes in style, choice of words, and assumptions about the reader's knowledge that point to this writer's 1953 conception of her audience:

Here is new art. For a few decades it seemed like nothing more than a new technical device in the sphere of drama, a new way of preserving and retailing dramatic performances. But today its development has already belied this assumption. The screen is not a stage, and what is created in the conception and realization of a film is not a play. It is too early to systematize any theory of this new art, but even in its present pristine state it exhibits quite beyond any doubt, I think—not only a new technique, but a new poetic mode. (Langer 411)

Whereas Canby could use expressions suitable to a review, such as "gaudy desperados," "all-American joyride," and "important and exciting film," the phrases might seem out of place in an essay by the philosopher Susanne Langer. It is not that one style is more correct than the other; it is simply a question of audience. A novice to film studies might feel somewhat lost in Langer's comparatively accessible essay on film theory. The reason is that novices are not the audience that this writer supposes: she imagines an audience with experience in the study of history, aesthetics, and philosophy and some understanding of the debates about stage drama versus movies. The purpose of her essay is not difficult to see (to convince her readers of the significance of film as an art), but how she argues her point is understandable when we realize she is addressing an academic and intellectual community that, at the time, was suspicious of the status of the movies as an art.

### The Critical Essay

The critical essay usually expected in film courses falls between the theoretical essay and the movie review. The writer of this kind of essay presumes that his or her reader has seen or is at least familiar with the film under discussion, although that reader may not have thought extensively about it. This writer might therefore remind the reader of key themes and elements of the plot, but a lengthy retelling of the story of the film is neither needed nor acceptable. The focus of the essay is far more specific

than that of a review, because the writer hopes to reveal subtleties or complexities that may have escaped viewers on the first or even the second viewing. Thus, the essay might focus on a short sequence at the beginning of the film, or on a camera angle that becomes associated with a specific character. In the following excerpt, Brian Henderson also discusses *Badlands*, but whereas Canby's audience was the reader of a large newspaper, Henderson's audience is more academic, similar to the one a student might address in a film course:

Whatever their wishes, critics of Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) have been drawn into polemical dispute. Writers favorable to the film have defended it against those who called it a failure when it first appeared and against those who have ignored it since then. The issue has been further complicated, and polemics renewed, by the release in 1978 of Malick's *Days of Heaven*.

This is not a favorable background for the serious criticism of any work, still less for that open-ended exploration which a new and unstudied work invites. I believe *Badlands* is one of the most remarkable American films of the 1970s, but I have no interest here in addressing the arguments against it. I assume, at any rate, that the film will be seen and studied for a long time to come.

What is attempted here is a beginning analysis of *Badlands*, or perhaps several beginnings. I take an obvious point of departure: the film's voiceover narration by Holly—indeed only its first part, approximately the film's first sixteen minutes. This is, emphatically, just one approach to the film and not a privileged one. A consideration of Holly's narration opens up other topics and leads to other analyses, but any approach does this.

To treat Holly's narration as I wish to do it is necessary to say something in advance about the film's dramaturgy, acting style and use of language. These important topics deserve, needless to say, fuller treatment than my prefatory remarks provide.

*Badlands'* approach to character is undeniably modern. Kit and Holly are both blank and not blank, emotionless and filled with emotion, oblivious to their fates and caught up in them, committed to the trivial but aware—glancingly—of the essential. They are empty, hence constantly fill themselves up with useless objects, souvenirs, movie-magazine gossip; they pose tests for themselves and try on different make-up, clothes, attitudes, roles. This is an "existential" view of character, and it undoubtedly leads to contradictions by conventional standards. Thus Kit and Holly are in love, living only for the moments they

spend together; but they play cards with boredom in the country and even find sex boring. Holly kids with her father and (almost) weeps when he dies, but runs away with his killer a few hours later. . . .

Every mode of cinema has a mode of dramaturgy distinctive to it and a corresponding distinctive acting or performance style. *Badlands*, which may represent a cinematic mode in and of itself, requires a special kind of acting to take its place within, but not upset, a very delicate balance of *mise-en-scène*, narrative, voiceover, music, etc. We must be able to look at Kit and Holly and to look through them sometimes alternately, sometimes simultaneously. This requires an acting style at once flat and flamboyant, realistic and theatrical. Our eyes must be on the characters even as we are paying attention to other things. Our attention is continually drawn toward the characters, and distracted away from them. Sheen and Spacek realize these requirements superbly, filling the film with their interesting sounds and motions but never resolving into anything, never substantializing, defining or "becoming" characters. Perhaps more correctly, their series of poses is readable as exactly that, or as eccentric character. As in Brecht, it is difficult to distinguish the acting style of the performers from the nature of the characters. (38–40)

Canby's and Henderson's essays are both positive responses to *Badlands*, and they share similar interests. They differ significantly, however, in aim and audience. At least as Henderson declares it, the purpose of his essay is not so much to convince his readers to like or dislike the film but to add to their understanding of it. He assumes that his readers will continue to see and study the movie and, perhaps, to add to the academic debate about it. He also takes for granted that his audience knows the story, knows the characters, and is familiar with terms like *mise-en-scène*; accordingly, he can choose very specific parts of the film—Holly's narration and the acting style—to demonstrate his point that there are important innovations in *Badlands*. Finally, even in this section of the essay, one sees an organization typical of a good critical argument: The writer begins by placing the film in the context of other critical and scholarly views, announces his aim, and then moves from an analysis of character and acting style to some general conclusions about how to understand this style.

For the student writer, the question of audience, highlighted in these three essays, is equally central to writing about film. Sometimes, an instructor may give you an assignment aimed at a specific audience and testing your ability to address that audience: "Write a review of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) for the readers of *Time* magazine." More often, your

instructor will simply ask you to write a critical essay. Keep in mind that your audience in these cases is neither your instructor alone (who, you might imagine, can learn nothing from you) nor some large and unknown public in the streets (to whom you might be prone to tell the most obvious facts about a movie). Rather, envision your audience in most situations as your fellow students, individuals who have seen the movie and may know something about it, but who have not studied it closely. This audience will probably not need to be told that “*The Wizard of Oz* is an old American film that has become a children’s classic”; they may, however, be interested if you note that “*The Wizard of Oz* was directed by Victor Fleming, who the same year (1939) made *Gone with the Wind*.” Likewise, few of your fellow viewers need to be told that “Ophul’s *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970) is a very long French movie about World War II,” but they may be fascinated by a detailed description of the opening shots.

## OPINION AND EVALUATION

When you write about film, personal opinion and taste will necessarily become part of your argument. Some critics, for example, have a conscious or unconscious prejudice against foreign films. Others favor the work of a single director, such as John Huston or Alain Resnais. Still others, annoyed by literary adaptations unless they are faithful to the original, dislike films such as the contemporary version of Shakespeare’s *Othello* called *O* (2001) but defend the Shakespeare films of Kenneth Branagh. Even those essays that appear to be chiefly descriptive or analytical—biographical or historical writings or essays that aim at an objective analysis of a sequence of shots—involve a certain amount of personal choice and evaluation. In some essays, factual description may be more prominent than evaluative judgments, but the differences are of degree, not kind. Most writing about film involves some personal opinion and evaluation.

No reader, of course, will be satisfied with a writer who uses his personal opinions to avoid or disguise a solid critical position. After watching Laurence Olivier’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (1944), one student wrote:

Although I have not read that many Shakespeare plays, this is the first one I ever liked. The opening, I think, is the most interesting part and

the section that first grabbed my attention, because, in my opinion, it literally transforms what I feel is a dry play into an exciting film and, at the same time, comments on the difference between drama and film. In those opening images, it seems to me that Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows, I feel, how the movies can transcend dramatic limits. He makes the play much more alive for me.

Here the excess of *I*’s and personal qualifiers weakens the point the writer wishes to make, and it is doubtful that idiosyncratic problems, such as the writer’s limited experience with the Shakespeare plays, are of the faintest interest to any reader. However, removing all references to the writer’s personal experience of the film results only in stiffer but equally unsure prose:

The opening is the most interesting part of *Henry V* (1944), because it comments on the central difference between drama and film. In these opening images, Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows how the movies can transcend those dramatic limits.

Somewhere in between, the writer finds the proper balance of personal experience and objective observation, judiciously integrating those personal experiences and feelings about the film that are probably also valid for other viewers:

Even for the viewer uneasy with a Shakespeare play, Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944) is an engaging experience. For me, the opening is the most interesting part and the section which is most likely to attract a reluctant viewer, because it literally transforms what, for some, might be a dry play into an expansive film and, at the same time, comments on the central difference between drama and film. In these opening images, Olivier acknowledges the original stage world of the drama and shows how the movies can transcend those dramatic limits. For viewers like myself, Shakespeare suddenly comes alive.

The useful rule of thumb here is to try to be aware of when and how your personal perspective and feelings enter your criticism and to what degree they are valuable or not—when, in short, those judgments seem to say something true not only for yourself but for others as well. A personal distaste for action films or, say, for slow-paced romantic stories could become a rich part of an essay when the writer carefully thinks

through and offers reasons for that distaste. Or my expectations, as someone who mainly sees slick Hollywood films, could be crucial in analyzing my slight confusion yet fascination with a film by the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier—such as *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)—because other viewers have often shared that confusion.

In the examples used earlier, both Canby and Henderson openly introduce their own opinions and personalities into their argument. Neither balks at using *I* to underline the presence of his perspective: “One may legitimately debate the validity of Mr. Malick’s movie, but not, I think, his immense talent,” (Canby); “I take an obvious point of departure: the film’s voiceover narration by Holly. . . . This is, emphatically, just one approach to the film and not a privileged one” (Henderson). Canby’s is perhaps a more opinionated *I*; Henderson’s is more detached and cautious. Yet, both Canby and Henderson use their personal positions to help form and energize their different responses to Malick’s film. One might say that these uses of *I* are only the most forthright and direct indication of the many other evaluations and judgments that enter the essays: Canby’s criticism of the romantic, junglelike setting where the two outlaws hide, and Henderson’s interest in narrative and theoretical questions about “performance.”

When you write about the movies, personal feelings, expectations, and reactions may be the beginning of an intelligent critique, but they must be balanced with rigorous reflection on where those feelings and expectations and reactions come from and how they relate to more objective factors concerning the movie in question: its place in film history, its cultural background, its formal strategies. François Truffaut, both an intelligent filmmaker and a perceptive critic, has observed that “instead of indulging passions in criticism, one must at least try to be critical with some purpose. . . . What is interesting is not pronouncing a film good or bad, but explaining why” (370).

Writing about film, then, is admittedly complex. It can also be exciting and rewarding. In 1908 Leo Tolstoy remarked about the movies: “You can see that this little clicking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life—in the life of writers” (410). Try to approach films with the same interest and shrewdness. Try to conceive of yourself as a writer with an equally purposeful and dynamic relationship with the movies you watch and enjoy. Or, in the words of filmmaker Sally Potter, director of *Thriller* (1979), *Orlando* (1992), *The Tango Lesson* (1997), and *Yes* (2004), remember that there is a “pleasure in analysis, in unravelling, in thinking” (Pam Cook 27).

## Exercises

1. Take opposite sides in a debate about a single film. Write one or two paragraphs criticizing the film and then one or two paragraphs defending it.
2. Write a screening report on a single film and then a review of three or four paragraphs. Then, rewrite it as a critical essay. Explain briefly the differences and what is gained and lost in each.