Writing About Film

Film Watching and Writing

We have already explored the difference between the review and critical analysis, but what are the skills you will need if you are going to write about film?

Often, the problem is we are so familiar with the story, that we begin with story analysis and do not go very far beyond it.

Between reiterating the plot, and simply examining the narrative, our work is more descriptive than analytical.

Partially that is because we only see the story, not the elements that make it up.

Another problem is, instead of analysis, we write a review.

The focus often ends up not on the film at all, but on us and what we like.

How do we avoid those things?

Good film writing starts with good film watching.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Let's start with research.

There are two kinds of research - primary and secondary.

For a film student, primary resources might seem hard to come by.

It is not impossible that a student might be able to contact people who were actually involved in the making of a film, but whether you do or not, there is one kind of primary research you will always conduct.

This is your own viewing of the film.

Watching a Film

When you watch a film, noting the film language employed and doing textual analysis, you are doing your primary research into the film.

From the remarks about the review, you may have gotten the idea that your own reactions are not important. This is not true.

Subjective Responses

Your individual and subjective responses to a film can be very helpful. Suppose you watched James Cameron's Avatar.

What moments caught your attention? Why did they do so?

If the film convinced you that you were learning about life on another world, how did the film accomplish this? Was it the realistic design of the alien creatures? Was it the use of perspective (and even 3D) to make you feel you were part of the film world?

How much did the sound affect you?

What was the effect of the color?

Write about Film

When you start to write about film, you are your own greatest resource.

You are not writing about why the film is a good film or why you liked it - you are writing about how the film worked.

While you are watching, take notes of general things you notice and sometimes even specific annotated shot lists.

The general notes will help focus your impressions and keep you thinking about why each film language choice was made. Shot lists are excellent for this.

Let's say a scene starts with a fade in, and then an establishing shot of the environment, which turns into a medium shot of the main character that dollies into a close-up, formally establishing where the scene is taking place.

This is very different from a scene that starts with a long shot that suddenly becomes a close-up when a character stands up into the frame, like the beginning of The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966).

Why do different Directors vary the choices in scenes so much?

Your notes will help you answer questions like these.

When you look at your notes and your annotations you may see repeated directorial choices, repeated elements of art design, and a pattern of camera movement or editing. Noting all these things helps you understand why the film has the effect it does on the audience and also the director's intent as he or she crafted his film.

The more you are engaged with the film, the easier it is to write about it.

This is probably one of the most important things to remember as you write about film. Many students try to write about a film based on YouTube viewings of portions of the film, or based on other writings about the film.

These results are a very poor film analysis because your own primary research is no longer included. Trust your instincts! (And take notes as you watch.) Do not forget the best research materials appear either before the story or just afterwards - the credits.

Presented in the credits are all the key personnel who were involved in the creation of the film. If you watch them you will start to have some insight into the creative people who you

may want to find out more about - do not worry if they scroll by too fast, you can always find them later on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

When you move on from the credits to IMDb, you have moved to secondary research materials. These are materials that other people have made or written about the film.

A frequent problem students run into is trying to write a film paper by stitching together the film analysis of other writers. At best, this will result in a sloppy piece of writing that shows no interest, energy, and personal engagement.

At its worst, it is plagiarism.

SECONDARY RESEARCH

Secondary Research Materials

When you look for secondary research materials, try to look outside the box. In this case, it means the Internet.

There are many great resources on the Internet, but there are also many inaccurate sources as well. Sources created by fans of a certain film or genre may be helpful, but they may also be inaccurate or misleading.

Remember, there are many books on film, both academic and popular, which have been edited more closely than many Internet sources. Look for books and film journals.

Do not forget most DVDs or Blu-rays include documentary materials (another reason why watching the film on your computer may not be the best idea). While these vary greatly in quality, at their best they can be extremely helpful.

Finally, if you are using the internet, be persistent. If your search starts at Wikipedia, do not let your search end at Wikipedia.

There are usually many useful citations and sites linked at the end of a Wikipedia article, often featuring academic as well as fan-created resources.

Follow the links, write a number of search strings (especially those that are based on what you have read), and use some time to find information.

Vocabulary

Finally, do not forget vocabulary.

Since the beginning of this course you have been learning the correct words to use when describing when something is happening on film.

Being precise and using terms accurately is one way your readers will understand exactly what you mean.

There is a reason this course has spent so much time on the language of filmmaking and the language of film analysis - it has been giving you the means to get your ideas across to other people in the most accurate way.

Just saying -

"there is this guy in the desert"

is not the same as saying -

"the film begins with a wide shot of Monument Valley that pans past sagebrush until we see a horse and rider."

Be specific. Talk the talk.

Assessment Advice

Academic honesty is a very important part of the IB Program. Materials you use should always be cited and sourced.

For the Independent Study assessment, one of the requirements is an annotated list of sources, which includes not only bibliographic information on the sources you have used, but also a short summary of how you used the sources and what place they played in the creation of your documentary source.

One of the primary questions of the course is, How do I know this?

If you know something because the information came from someone else, it must be credited.

Also, you are not expected to know everything - the history of film began before any of us were born. You are expected to let people know from where the information came.