

Writing Film Reviews

A film review is written to express one person's (the reviewer's) opinion about the merits or lack thereof of a particular film. Film reviews often help people decide whether a film is one that they want to see. Good reviewers do this by providing enough information about what the film does and how it does it.

When reviewing a film, it is a good idea to take notes (even in the dark), see the film at least twice, borrow or rent it on DVD (or digitally), and then try to narrow your focus as much as possible. Reviews are usually short, and while it's important to provide a broad overview, it is even more important to keep your reader's interest.

PROVIDING CONTEXT OR BACKGROUND ABOUT THE FILM

Even if the film you are reviewing is or was very popular, you need to provide your reader with certain information to help them make sense of your review. You don't need to provide a detailed plot summary or a list of all characters, but the basic information about the film is essential for readers.

You can use the 4 Ws to help with this task: who? what? where? when?

What?

What is the film's title? What is the film about? What are the main ideas it presents? What ideas, themes or topics do you want to discuss?

Who?

Who wrote it? Who directed it? Who are the main characters? Who are the actors (main and supporting)?

Where?

Where was it filmed? Where is it set? Where did you see it?

When?

When was it made? When is it set (in what time period)? When did you see it?

What if everything we thought was real—these streets, this city, the year 1999—was merely a computer-generated program in our heads, a cyberdream of reality? That, in short, is the premise of *The Matrix*, which appears to be set in the present—that is where its hero (Keanu Reeves), thinks he is—but it is actually set in 2199, when artificial-intelligence machines rule the world, and humans are merely the crops they grow to supply energy. (David Ansen, *Newsweek*)

Thomas Vinderberg's film *The Celebration* confronts a number of serious issues: incest, madness suicide and dysfunctional families. But it is Vinderberg's ability to take a reprehensible character and present him as likeable, generous, and charming, that surprises the viewer the most.

TAKING A CRITICAL POSITION

Many reviewers mistake the meaning of the word “critic” to mean “criticizer”: good reviewers, however, understand that taking a critical position means evaluating a film according to certain criteria. The criteria you use will depend on your own interests, your expertise and the focus of your particular assignment (if you have one). The following are a few examples of different types of criteria.

What effect does the work have on the viewer? You might consider what’s missing, what’s worth seeing. Is the film compelling? Difficult? Overwhelming? Aesthetically appealing? Frightening? Abstract? Flamboyantly energetic? Dizzily enjoyable?

Is the film based on a novel or short story? If so, was the screenplay written by the author of the original text? Is the screenplay faithful to the original text? Do the filmmakers complicate or compliment the storyline through the use of special effects, flashbacks, recurring image motifs, or other visual schema?

Another major problem is in the characterization of *Beloved*. Whereas Morrison created a feral, but relatively articulate person—into whose psyche the reader is occasionally permitted entry—the film presents a repulsive creature (a bizarre performance by Thandie Newton) whose croaks and drools and screeches recall Linda Blair’s demonic child in *The Exorcist*. In the book, *Beloved* first appears in a quietly lyric scene, her slim form rising out of the river... (John Tibbetts, *Literature Film Quarterly*)

Is the film typical of one particular film genre? Is it a combination of more than one? Does it make a mockery of the genre or deconstruct it?

A flamboyant remake of Kurosawa’s sword-and-samurai spectacular *Yojimbo*, *A Fistful of Dollars* was the famed Sergio Leone’s first spaghetti western, and the film that created the iconic Clint Eastwood persona ... This is the movie that reinvented the American western and its mythology, even as it “follows the plot and even the camera set-ups of Kurosawa’s classic black comedy. (Michael Sragow, *The New Yorker* quoted in *Cinemathèque*)

Is the acting in the film what you would expect given the actors, genre or story? How do the actors’ portrayals enrich or detract from the film?

How does this film compare to others by the same actor, director, or producers? The film similar to the kind of work they do in general? Why?

All three of Paul Almond’s previous films have been stunning...

If you’ve got the necessary background or if it’s part of your assignment, you might want to ask yourself how the shots, sequences, lighting, the use of superimposed image, editing, etc. influence your opinion of the film.

Who are you? What is your background? How does your experience influence your response?

As a third year ECUAD student, specializing in media studies, I have some insight into...

FORM

The tone, structure, voice or form you use in a film review depends entirely upon the audience you're writing for. If you're writing for a publication, look at the general tone of other reviews and try to match it. If you are writing for an assignment, you will probably want to adopt a more professional tone.

Bunch of guys at a Manhattan 'plex watching The Matrix. Carrie-Ann Moss kicks some 'droid butt, makes a streetwide leap from one building top to the top to the next, then crash lands through a small window. "The bitch is bad," one of the guys opines. "Go, girl!" Then Laurence Fishburne shows up as Morpheus—a morphing Orpheus, a black White Rabbit, an R-and-B Obi-Wan Kenobe, a big bad John the Baptist, a Gandalf who grooves, every wise guide from literature, religion, movies and comix. Though he's in a dark room in the dead of night, as if he needed to be more cool, Fishburne is wearing these teeny black shades. Another guy at the 'plex says approvingly, "those glasses are fabulous!" To deliver a futurismo fashion statement and a can of whup-ass in the same movie—this is smart filmmaking. (Richard Corliss & Jeffrey Ressler, Time)

USING SOURCES

Most reviews published in newspapers and magazines don't rely heavily on outside sources. But if you are writing a review for a course assignment, you may want or need to consult other sources of information, such as other reviews of the same film or films by the same director, academic essays in journals, or interviews. How does this additional information change or deepen your response to the film?

In his 1999 interview with Cineaste, Thomas Vinterberg states that The Celebration "was never meant to be a comedy at all. But that people laugh because of the cruelty of the film." What Vinterberg says may be true, but...

MORE INFORMATION

"7 Tips for Writing a Film Review" from Daily Writing Tips:

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/7-tips-for-writing-a-film-review/>

"Film Review" from the Thompson Writing Program:

<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/film-review-1.original.pdf>

Many examples of professional film reviews can be found on The Globe and Mail's website, and they are updated frequently:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/>