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A Short Guide to Writing about Film

NINTH EDITION

Timothy Corrigan



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*A Short Guide to Writing
about Film*

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NINTH EDITION
GLOBAL EDITION

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Preface

This book demonstrates—uniquely, I believe—how thinking about and writing about film are intricately bound together. Equally important, it draws on and develops the fact that students write better about a subject they know and like and that few subjects today are enjoyed and understood more universally than the movies. On the one hand, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* walks students through the process of converting the fun and pleasure of watching a movie into the satisfaction of articulating ideas about that movie. With numerous student and professional examples along the way, it moves from note taking and first drafts to polished essays and research projects, demonstrating how an analysis of a film becomes more subtle and rigorous as part of a composition process. At the same time, the book assumes that we write better and more willingly about subjects with which we engage confidently and comfortably. For most students today, the movies are that subject, and *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* draws on that love and knowledge of films—ranging from movies that students easily recognize to ones they may only have read or heard about—as a way of encouraging and developing writing skills.

The aim of this book is threefold: to save time for instructors of film who, in presenting the complexities of the art and industry of film, are hard put to deal with the writing problems of students; to lessen students' anxiety about writing, by clarifying points that many instructors mistakenly presume students already know; and, in doing this, to encourage more enjoyable and articulate communication between the two.

UPDATES AND ENHANCEMENTS FOR THE NINTH EDITION

As with other editions, the aim of this latest edition has been to retain its size and focus so that the book remains practical for many kinds of film courses. Within those parameters, however, this edition features a number of important changes meant to keep the book up-to-date and to sharpen its pedagogical tools:

- *The addition of a list of learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter.* Each chapter is now introduced by a series of clearly and succinctly stated objectives that students should have

in mind while they read that chapter. Students will then be able to read these chapters with clear goals before them. After completing each chapter they can return to those bulleted points, carefully review them, and determine whether they have succeeded in understanding the chief aims of the chapter.

- *The integration and highlighting of “writing cues” in each chapter.* Another significant addition is the highlighted insertion of different cues in each chapter. Coordinated with the discussion at that point in the text, these writing cues, in effect, ask the student to pause and apply that discussion to a film they might know or be watching for class. These become critical checkpoints to remind the student that the lessons of the chapter presume an active dialogue with the student reader.
- *Increasing coverage of digital media.* As is well-known, digital technologies and digital media—from the Internet to Blu-ray DVDs—increasingly define movies and writing about movies today. This edition, therefore, continues to expand its discussion of the specific ways digital technologies impact not only how we view and understand films but also how we research and write about films.
- *Updated examples and illustrations of recent films.* An important adjustment in every edition of this book has been updating examples and integrating recent movies into the discussions and illustrations. While I am convinced that it’s crucial to introduce students to older films and foreign films as a way of piquing their curiosity and their interest in films they may not know, it is also paramount to provide examples of contemporary movies that students recognize and enjoy. Ideally, the updates in this edition will thus engage students more in the discussions of central points and thus lead to better writing.

THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

Those of us who teach film rarely have time to discuss writing about film. Most of us are busy presenting films and various books about those films, and the usual presumption we are forced to make is that students know how to put what they see and think into a comprehensible written form. As common and forgivable as that presumption may be, it is less reliable today than ever before. Instructors must increasingly puzzle over and bemoan those enthusiastic students who seem to know so much and are brimming with things to say about movies but who write confusing and disappointing papers.

One way to avoid this problem is to rely on examinations that elicit short answers. As useful and as necessary as this method is, especially in large lecture courses on film history, it sidesteps several beneficial demands of the critical essay, demands that make real differences in the quality of a student's thinking. An essay forces a student to use special skills: to generate and focus original ideas; to organize, sustain, and support those ideas until they are fully developed; to fine-tune perceptions by revising the language used to describe them; to employ proper grammar and syntax as part of the convincing presentation of an argument; and to make use of the opinions of others through intelligent research.

Writing essays about films is, in short, one of the most sophisticated ways to respond to them. To elicit scope, originality, and rigor in a student's thinking, an instructor, I believe, needs to guide that student through the mechanics of the essay form. Filling the gap between writing handbooks and film-studies textbooks by distilling writing lessons as they apply specifically to film criticism, this book hopes to be that guide.

Although the emphasis is on the analytical writing done in most film courses, the book can be used in many ways, with a variety of other textbooks, and by any professor who believes that writing about film is part of learning about film. This is a concise and flexible book that can be adapted to a wide variety of writing courses or film courses as a supplemental or central text. In all cases, its goal is to promote good thinking and good writing about film.

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*A Short Guide to Writing
about Film*

1

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING ABOUT THE MOVIES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize and appreciate the pleasures and rewards of film analysis.
- Trace the movement from discussions about movies to writing about movies.
- Describe some of the different aims of film analysis and how they can be determined by determining your audience.
- Distinguish between a screening report, a movie review, a theoretical essay, and an analytical essay.
- Describe how to balance personal opinion and critical evaluation in your writing.

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. The 2013 release of British filmmaker Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* became a cultural forum in the United States about the horrifying brutality of slavery and its US legacy. In 2012, Academy Award® winner *Zero Dark Thirty* reignited public debates about the use of torture in Afghanistan and the extent to which it assisted in the killing of Osama bin Laden, and three years previously *Avatar* brought home a war on an alien planet with a three-dimensional (3D) technology that purportedly would

revolutionize how we watch movies. *Blue Is the Warmest Color* became one of the many recent films that opened up new perspectives on and conversations about gender and sexuality, and in the same year *The Fifth Estate* (2013) recounted the trials of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange while Assange was still on the run. 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 on 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 *Gravity* (2013), we might chat briefly about certain characters 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 their intricacies and complexities, realizing that our commentary adds to rather than subtracts from our enjoyment of them. 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 richer kind of pleasure.

In fact, in these cases 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 analytical

writing about film offers the same promises and rewards. For example, when pressured to explain carefully why she liked *Gravity*, one student discovered that her understanding of and appreciation for the film were more complex and subtle than she had initially realized (Figure 1.01). Acknowledging that there was no missing the spectacular special effects of the film, she began to think more about not only what makes the film so enjoyable, but also about how it communicates important ideas about humanity. She began her expanded response:

While most discussions of the 2013 *Gravity* will undoubtedly focus on the way its 3D technology transports us into outer space as few films ever have, we should not overlook the heart of the film: its ability to skillfully tell a gripping and suspenseful tale about the grit and determination of a woman struggling to survive under enormous pressure. Even severe critics would probably acknowledge the mesmerizing cinematography which not only immerses us in deep space but also, more subtly, involves us in a meditative story about the power of emotional relationships. The story itself is relatively straightforward. On a routine space walk, medical engineer Ryan Stone and astronaut Matt Kowalsky are catastrophically separated from their shuttle, tethered only to each other. Later, after Kowalsky sacrifices himself so that she can make her



Figure 1.01 Writing about *Gravity* (2013) can become an opportunity to clarify and develop initial impressions into more developed ideas and thoughts about that film.