Thinking Critically About Film

*Article adapted from James H. Crozier, University of Missouri*

**1.1: Introduction**

Americans are increasingly becoming a nation of watchers and listeners. Americans still read, to be sure, and there are few thoughtful people who would underestimate the intrinsic value of literature. Yet we are increasingly living in a society dominated by the images that come to us daily through our televisions or over the Internet. In this state of affairs, it should come as no surprise that Hollywood has been on the forefront of this techno-social wave, with movies becoming a larger part of our culture than ever before.

Amid the high-tech atmosphere of the twenty-first century, it is interesting to note the recent resurgence of the ancient world as the setting for new films. In 2000, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* proved that audiences could be as receptive to the ancient world as they had been in the 1950s and 1960s, when now classic movies like *Ben Hur* (1959) and *Spartacus* (1960) commanded so much attention. In 2004, Mel Gibson upped the ante further with *The Passion of the Christ*, daring not only to present Jesus' sufferings with gut-wrenching realism, but also to take the remarkable step of using Latin and Aramaic in the film's dialogue. Even the critically disparaged *Troy* (2004) managed to be financially successful on account of audiences' enduring interest in the antiquity. The success of these movies, in turn, has led to new television offerings exploring the ancient world such as HBO's *Rome* (2005) and ABC's *Empire* (2005).

Given Hollywood's revived interest in antiquity as a setting for films, it seems appropriate to look back on the ancient film genre as a way of understanding the history of the cinema and examining our enduring fascination with the ancient world itself. This course will introduce you to the history of Hollywood's treatment of the past, acquaint you with the fundamentals of film criticism and teach you to use critical techniques to examine some of the best and most important films ever made about the world.

**1.2: Why Write About Movies?**

Before embarking upon our discussion of the nuts and bolts of film criticism, we should ask ourselves a fundamental and important question: why would we want to write about movies in the first place? Films are, after all, pervasive in our society and not all of them are good. Many of us have had the experience of watching some dreadful film on television and asking ourselves how on Earth such a dreadful film ever came to be made in the first place! So, we should begin our study of film criticism by first accepting this one simple premise: not all movies are worth commenting on. That said, we can all think of films that ourselves and others regard as masterpieces. *Jaws* (1975), for example., is often cited as a viewer favorite. This film seems to work on almost every level. It appeals to audiences as a horror film—a film about man versus nature, a study of human greed, obsession, courage, fear, and vengeance.

Like all great movies, *Jaws* has a multi-dimensional appeal – it moves different audience members at different levels of understanding and emotional response. The purpose of writing about a movie like *Jaws* is to identify each of these different levels of appeal and explain how and why the film succeeds. Such critical inquiries result in not only a greater understanding of the film, but also in the enhancement of our own appreciation of the movie as a work of art. The avenues of understanding that open to us when we begin thinking and writing critically about film can have a great, and sometimes unexpected, impact upon our appreciation of a film. Once more, *Jaws* provides an interesting example of how simple research (and I am using this term very loosely, as we shall see) can uncover facts about a film that can alter our perceptions as audience members.

One interesting aspect of *Jaws* is that Steven Spielberg does not allow the audience to see the shark until the very end of the film. Instead, the shark is shown only through long shots that track its movement underwater from the perspective of the film's protagonists (i.e., the humans) and by the movement of yellow buoys that Captain Quint attaches to the shark using a harpoon gun. This decision, it seemed, was sheer genius on Spielberg's part. By only showing the buoys, Spielberg infused his movie with an ominous Hitchcockian tension that would have never been achieved had the shark revealed itself early on in the film.

**Figure 1.1:** The mechanical shark used in the movie *Jaws* had so many problems during production that it was nicknamed "Flaws" by the production staff.

In 2003, according to the "E! True Hollywood Story" of the movie, it turns out that the only reason Spielberg didn't show the shark until the end of *Jaws* was because the mechanical shark designed by the special-effects department *was constantly breaking down during filming*! Had Spielberg had his way, the shark would have appeared from the beginning of the film which, as he now admits, would have surely diminished the dramatic tension that was achieved by the necessity of "shooting around" the malfunctioning shark (the use of the yellow buoys was Spielberg's ingenious solution to the shark-malfunction problem). Needless to say, I was surprised by the information my "research" had uncovered. Did the new information change my estimation of Spielberg as a director? Not really; I simply add great luck to his list of qualities as a director. Does this information enhance my understanding of *Jaws* as a motion picture? Certainly; the movie now seems even more amazing when I think about the adversity that the cast, crew, and director had to overcome when faced with the mechanically misbehaving star of the film!

I hope that my *Jaws* tirade has made the point that criticism and research are valuable tools for enhancing our understanding of the films that most appeal to us as audience members. Moreover, I hope that my story about *Jaws* has impressed another important point about writing about film. It helps us share our views with others and engage others in a dialogue about the meaning of what we have seen in a film.

**1.3: The Three Kinds of Film Essay**

Writing about film can be divided into three basic categories: *movie reviews*, *theoretical essays*, and *critical essays*. Of these types of essay, the *movie review* is by far the most common and familiar form of film "criticism." Indeed, for many Americans, the only contact they have with any sort of formal film criticism comes from the reviews that they read in the newspaper or online. Generally, movie reviews are expected to appeal to large audiences and have two proper functions. They convey the gist of the movie to prospective audience members, and they convince the reader to see or avoid the movie in question.

While movie reviews certainly play an important role in the movie business, apart from very elementary work on writing about movies, they are typically not very useful in classes that aim to produce greater understanding and appreciation of movies as art.

Far removed from the simple movie review is the *theoretical essay*, which discusses a film and its relation to the movie industry, methods of cinematic technique, or the ideological leanings of the film industry. Theoretical essays are meant for an audience extremely well versed in advanced film theory and with the workings of the movie industry. Theoretical essays are typically produced by, and for, very serious students of the cinema. While some students enrolled in this course may be studying film at this high level, its target audience is, in fact, far wider. For this reason, theoretical writing will not play a role in this course. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that high-level critical essays about film do exist, and that they constitute an important, albeit small, element of filmic writing.

The *critical essay* makes up the third genre of film writing and occupies the middle ground between the highly sophisticated theoretical essay and the very general movie review. In essence, critical essays written about film approach their subjects in much the same way that essays composed for English literature classes approach written works. Critical essays assume that the audience has viewed the movie under discussion and is familiar with its general story line and points of thematic emphasis. The goal of the critical essay is to reveal a subtle complexity of the movie that, once identified, adds to the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the film as a whole. Critical essays will form the bulk of the assignments that you will undertake in this course.

**1.4: Preparing to Watch a Film**

When we prepare to watch a movie for pleasure, either at home or at the theatre, we usually undertake only a very cursory preparation. We may read a review, listen to a friend tell us about the film, or simply say to ourselves: "Well, I am shelling out $7.50 for this—I hope it's good!" Watching a movie for analysis is, needless to say, a bit more involved than this. Yet the raw response that we take away from a film, the "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" that we feel when the lights go up, forms the basis of our formal critical response. When we first see a film, our brains instinctively and necessarily begin the first stages of forming our critical response to it. The brain records everything that we experience as moviegoers: increased pulse during thrilling sequences, emotional pangs during scenes of sadness or happiness, marveling at special effects or especially effective cinematography.

**Figure 1.2:** While DVDs and VHS tapes do not replicate the full sensory experience of seeing a movie on the "big screen," they do offer distinct advantages over theatre going.

Since the initial *viewing* response to a movie is such an important factor in forming our *critical* response to it, we should consider it very important to screen movies in a quiet, comfortable environment with as few distractions as possible. While DVDs and VHS tapes do not replicate the full sensory experience of seeing a movie on the "big screen," they do offer two distinct advantages over theatre going. They allow you to choose a convenient time for watching films, and they make it easy to view the films a second, or even third, time. DVDs have the added bonus of allowing you to quickly find and replay important scenes over and over again, and allow you to see English or foreign language subtitles, which might clarify difficult bits of dialogue.

Now that we have talked a bit about the importance of our initial response to a movie, let's back up for a minute and discuss the steps that we should take as film critics prior to viewing a film for the first time. It is wise to prepare ourselves by taking the following preparatory steps

1. *Take stock of your own knowledge base and personal interests, and compare them with what you have found out about the film you are about to see.* Using our own knowledge, experiences, and interests in approaching a movie as art can be a powerful tool for generating unique insights into a film and opening avenues of analysis that we find appealing. In short, it never hurts to "write what you know" when you write about films.
2. *Be mindful of the role of technology in motion pictures, and realize that the level of technical sophistication you are accustomed to seeing in movies will be a part of your critical response to a film.* Simply put, be aware of the era in which the film you are watching was made and appreciate the movie within the context of the "modern" technology of its day. Being aware of technology and its use in movies can lead to interesting critical insights into movies no matter when they were produced.
3. *Be aware of the difference between small budget and large budget films and take note of how a director uses the resources at his disposal.* In short, the quality of a film is not, and should never, be extrapolated from the size of its budget, size of the studio producing it, or the presence or absence of "big name" talent. On the other hand, it is entirely fair to be critical of how big-budget pictures use the resources given them.

**Figure 1.3:** This image was taken as American troops landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day. Steven Spielberg achieved his goal of portraying the realism of war during the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Beyond taking a moment to meditate on these three preparatory steps to viewing a film, we must also *be aware of the fact that all movies have a goal of some sort*. For example, teen movies often have the goal of placing a teen idol in a funny or romantic stock situation to fall in love with an equally attractive opposite-sex cast member in a romantic/exotic location. Such movies, vapid and uninteresting to serious moviegoers, nevertheless have a goal in mind: to part star-struck, adolescent teens from their allowances! Serious movies are no different; they too have a goal, which is usually to make some sort of significant impact upon their audience. For example, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) is a film that successfully achieves multiple goals: realistically portraying the horrors of World War II combat, paying tribute to the courage of individuals who strive to maintain their humanity amidst the insane conditions of modern warfare, and demonstrating the senselessness and inhumanity of war itself. When viewing any film, *it is important to get a sense of what the director sets as his goal for the movie and how the director moves toward achieving this goal through the use of dialogue, imagery, camera work, sound effects and any other cinematic tools at his or her disposal*.

**1.5: Note Taking**

The best way to organize your thoughts regarding a film is to take notes during your initial, and perhaps secondary, screening of the movie.

1. *Take only a few notes during your initial screening of the movie, identifying key scenes or important themes.* This minimalist approach to note taking will allow you to focus more on the movie itself while still providing an opportunity for initial analysis on your part.
2. *After the movie, take fifteen minutes or so to review your notes and elaborate on them.* Ask yourself the following questions:
   * What was the main point or theme of this movie?
   * Which character is the protagonist or "main character"?
   * Which characters were important supporting characters?
   * Which scenes seemed especially important?
   * What elements or scenes were especially interesting to you as a viewer?
   * Did the movie meet your expectations as a viewer?
   * Were there any aspects of the movie that greatly surprised or intrigued you?

This list of questions is by no means exhaustive, but it should give you some ideas about how to begin forming a critical response to film. Remember, the quality of your analysis of any film will proceed directly from your understanding of the goal that the director sets out to achieve and how, in your opinion, the director was successful or unsuccessful in this effort.

1. *View the movie a second time, or ask for key scenes to be replayed, this time paying close attention to your own notes and adding to them as you view the movie.* During this second screening, we may want to "fast forward" through bits of the film that are less important to you and concentrate solely on areas that are of great interest. By the end of your second round of note taking, you should have some ideas about how you would like to approach some aspect of the film critically.

Following the above guidelines will allow you to build a sound foundation upon which you can base your critical thinking about film. Like any learned skill, you will find the more you practice these techniques, the more comfortable you will become using them. Along with this sense of comfort will come the confidence that you have achieved the first major goal of this course: to become a thoughtful and astute audience member.

### Study Questions

1. From whose perspective does this essay come and how does that impact us as readers?
2. What’s appealing to audiences about history?
3. Explain the benefits of thinking and writing critically about film.
4. Identify the three common types of film essay and explain the basic characteristics of each.
5. Describe the basic preparations that one should take before viewing a film.
6. How is our initial response to a film a “critical response”?
7. How much do you think the “look” of a film onscreen influences a viewer? Why?

1. What is a question we could ask of each film we view that would help us determine the film’s purpose(s)?
2. Describe good note taking technique for writing critical essays on the films to be viewed in this course.