

READERS WANT MORE THAN OPINION IN REVIEWS

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“How was the movie?” With all the multiple-screen theatres around, the cable TV channels, and home video rentals and purchases, it’s a common enough question. The answer, however, is often little more than a description of what happened, whether the viewer liked it or didn’t, and possibly a comparison to one or more other films.

Casual filmgoers may have positive or negative reactions to a movie, but only a vague understanding of why they feel one way or another. It takes some familiarity with how films are made to be able to tell that the acting might have been good, but the script was ridiculous or the directing was mediocre.

Ideally, a published review should evaluate the acting, directing, writing and production values in a film. All this can be useful information for a prospective filmgoer. It may also reinforce or challenge the views of someone who has already seen the picture reviewed. The true film buff and the serious cineaste usually wants something beyond a personal opinion.

Fans love to find out behind-the-scenes anecdotes and other trivia about the stars and production (often gleaned by the critic from studio-prepared presskits, or official studio websites), but a good critique should have something more. Of course that “something more” does not necessitate the generally pretentious obfuscation of semiotic jargon. Film criticism should be informative and enjoyable rather than obscure and dull.

A simple quiz to ask one’s self is “What was the creator’s intention, how well was it done, and was it worth doing?” These three questions developed by the poet and playwright Goethe for dramatic criticism can be applied to any work of art.

Most popular movies are designed primarily to entertain wide audiences and make money for their creators. Many if not most current hits are often best handled with a less formal, appreciative approach. They do not easily lend themselves to evaluation much deeper than personal reactions to their content and execution, or a cursory comparison to similar pictures. Such films are often forgotten within months or even weeks after viewing them.

Some films tend to stay with viewers, lingering in their consciousness, long after a screening. Others have the ability to draw the same viewers back over and over. Those films with more thought-provoking substance are also the kind most likely to inspire discussion. Pictures which build cult followings and large repeat audiences can benefit from deeper analysis, as well.

Traditional approaches to criticism will first categorize a work and give a short plot description. Then they may look at its historical and biographical significance. This

requires a basic knowledge of the period in which the film was made (not necessarily the same as the period depicted) and of the author or director's personal life and attitudes. Often the critic will examine the moral and philosophical ideas set forth in the film. These approaches, especially commentary on the story content and character, are the easiest for the average person to consider without a lot of specialized background or training in film.

Different reactions or interpretations may arise from re-edited reissues of movies, altered editions for television or home video, differences between American and European release versions, plus the rediscovery and/or reconstruction of more complete versions, original "director's cuts," etc.

Over the past two decades especially, articles have appeared which adapt "textual-linguistic" literary analysis to film. This fascinating school of criticism examines the different variations in a work in an attempt to decide upon the most "authentic" version. The rapid growth of home video sometimes gives movie fans many different versions of the same title to choose from. A good example is *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which had two different versions released to theatres and a third on network television, followed by a final "director's cut." *Fatal Attraction* had its ending completely rewritten and refilmed for its American release, but the original ending was shown in Japan and is available on some video versions. *Eyes Wide Shut* had the image digitally altered in the U.S. release in order to obtain an "R" rating, and the original version was only seen in Europe. Such changes may be made with (as in the case of *Eyes Wide Shut*) or without the director's participation. Director David Lynch had his name removed from the credits of his film of *Dune* when it was broadcast on network television, declaring that the re-edited result was no longer his film.

A variation on this analytical approach traces a work's growth and development from early drafts through revisions and various editions. These may include studying changes in a film's script and/or the "rough-cut" film, preview version, "road-show" original release version, general release version, re-release version(s), cable and network TV versions, and home video versions.

Several other critical approaches that can be used deal with the work as part of a genre (e.g., western, horror, sci-fi, musical, etc.), as an expression of human psychology (especially inner, often repressed feelings), or as a reflection of contemporary social concerns (e.g. crime, war, international unrest, economic issues, drug abuse, AIDS, racial or sexual prejudice, etc.).

Additional schools of criticism can deal with the structure and its effect on the total work, identify themes, imagery, and character types that have recurred in stories throughout history, or trace the motifs of patterns or symbols and images within a work.

Film is a collaborative art. A writer's script is interpreted by a director and actors, and executed by various technicians. A movie is more than simply a visualization of some story. Too many beginning film "critics" cover only the story content and ignore the film as a film. Others may obsess over techniques like computer-generated visual

effects, camera angles, or editing, while all but ignoring the plot and characters. Content is molded by technique into form—and these are the three most basic areas for analysis. Content, technique and form can each be divided and subdivided into specific points for discussion.

Of course it is impossible to look at every aspect of a film in one or two typed pages of perhaps 600 to 1200 words or so—an average length for a newspaper review or a two- to five-minute radio/TV review. Online reviews, especially in internet discussion forums, might be even shorter. Magazines and journals permit somewhat more space for film criticism. Any given film may lend itself to one or two major approaches, in addition to a brief synopsis and personal impressions. Other aspects may be touched upon, but to write about a film from each critical approach would be to do a book-length study (or perhaps a Master's thesis) on it. However, a familiarity with the types and methods of critical analysis makes it easier to understand one's own reactions, and to decide which critic's arguments seem most valid.

The best way to write intelligently about film is, first, to learn (from books, TV specials, classes, actual experience) how movies are made, and then to see as many films of all types from all eras of cinema as possible. You cannot evaluate the influence other films might have had on a certain director if you have not seen those films. The more films you see, the easier it is to recognize trends, patterns, and formulas—and then to decide whether some new movie is merely a “cheap ripoff” of earlier pictures, an “homage” to favorite films, or a “fresh interpretation” of a traditional form.

Many Blu-ray and DVD copies of movies include a great deal of informative background on the film, and alternate audio tracks with commentaries by the director, screenwriter, cast, and/or others involved in its production. In the case of older and foreign titles often a film scholar specializing in the field presents an audio commentary with both background information and critical analysis. Some DVDs even include copies of the screenplay and storyboards or production designs showing how various scenes were originally planned out on paper before being shot. Others include scenes that were deleted from the final cut or longer versions of existing scenes, sometimes with alternate takes or different editing. Studying such “bonus” materials on a couple dozen DVDs of your favorite films (along with several key classic titles) can easily be the equivalent of a year's study in film school or college film classes.

It can be a rewarding and even enjoyable habit to think about a film's many aspects and possible topics for discussion shortly after viewing it. As film theorist Robert Scholes has rather cryptically written, “A well-made film requires interpretation while a well-made novel may need only understanding.”